GLOOM OF YOUR EYES

Ilya Masodov

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The fifth angel sounded his trumpet,
and I saw a star that had fallen from the sky to the earth.
The star was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss.

Revelation 9.1

Heart of a cat

Sonya sits in front of the entrance of an apartment building, her child’s hands on the knees, and stares in front of herself into the darkness of the bushes. It’s not that she sees something obscured for the regular human being and it is not that she dreams about something huge and cold like a carbon iceberg. Dreams are unfamiliar to Sonya because she doesn't believe in the future to come. On the right side of her rises the dark rectangle of a sixteen storey building tainted by yellow windows, the building where her gloomy childhood has taken place, filled with loneliness and tears. Her childhood, ah such horror is emerging from its bottom.

Sonya cannot live. Sleep is not coming to her anymore to calm down her cold-punctured heart, to roll down her ossified dolly eyelids, to dissolve at least part of the time into the summer evenings’ warm forgetfulness of the quiet apple orchard in the countryside. Sonya’s insomnia is an immense star vortex that begins from her chest and transforms her from human into the space element that has no need for rest. Sonya’s path leads into the past and her feet rarely touch the ground.

Sonya raises her hands from the knees, takes them to her face and straightens her blonde hair looking in the mirror sprinkled by the stars of the autumn skies.

The legs of Sonya, covered from the middle of the thighs only by black stockings, are getting chilled by the merciless wind. They are tightly put together probably for the purpose of an equal distribution of cold and entropy. A radio plays out of the open window with no lights.

A wooden door to the entrance of the building with the halfway erased name “SVETA+”, written on it by the piece of a white brick, appears not to be designed for opening but rather to make an illusion of a possibility of enter or exit. Its battered sides grew into the frame with splinters sticking through the old paint, the handle is long since wrecked and on the head level there is an irregular shaped hole carved through the double layered plywood, probably cats, birds and other determined animals clawed through the falsehood their true pathway.

A car drives by Sonya, pouring lemon blood of its headlights over the bushes. It stops at the next building and extinguishes. Nobody gets out of its body, polished by the icy wind, the head of the driver calmly touches the steering wheel. Sonya stands up from her spot and moves along the bushes in a close-to-Euclidean line, the asphalt pricks her shoeless feet through the stockings in an unpleasant way so that Sonya regrets about the rain that never fell.

Her shins flicker above the evenings pavement, illuminated by the bizarre faces of chandeliers, she passes by the second window, stops and looks into the empty lightened window as if noticing on the clean plastered wall of someone’s kitchen an enormous fly. At approximately a 30 degree angle the gray cat runs towards the wall of the building, such color is specially picked to inhabit stone yards and rusty

eaves, hunt mice ghosts in the basement labyrinths and for expositional harmony with thick summer sunsets over vast rooftops.

From the spot where Sonya stands the tree is to be seen growing beyond the side of the building, a half-naked chestnut that still remembers times when it wasn’t surrounded by concrete horrors and there was an overgrown hill and a couple of rural houses, barely visible behind the intertwined branches of cherry trees. There are two hollows in this chestnut, one almost at its roots where boys from Sonya's childhood lit fires and blew up pellets, the second is a meter above the human’s height where some time ago Sonya hid a puppet she found in the sandbox, disguising its blue eyes with leaves, but the light of those eyes pierced through the leaves and an unknown thief took Sonya's treasure into the deep darkness of the strangers’ hallways where it smells like old books and fried meat and where one could meet strange people living their lives so disjointed to Sonya’s.

Sonya takes a little hairbrush out of the pocket and in no rush starts combing her bleached hair. From around the corner a young couple appears, the woman rolls a baby carriage in front of her, thick pitchy braid has red flashlight attached to it, illuminating the evening pathway. The wind sticks small strands of hair to her face, untangling it from the hairdo, no eyes are to be seen, a man appears rigorous and restrained. They turn down the street filled with rustling poplar trees, where along the trunks the vortex carries above flocks of colorless creatures so dissimilar to humans. Sonya slowly combs through her bleached hair and the wind makes her effort endless by entwining them all over again. In-between Sonya and

the wind there is an interconnective feeling probably because both of them are incomers from another time.

Finishing up with her doing, Sonya stows the hairbrush back into her pocket and continues the movement along the hedgeline, reaches the corner of the house and sees another building dark and unfinished, the crane sicks out of it, resembling a shadow of something dreadful, and people in construction worker's clothing walk on it and beams of spotlights move along it. Concrete bulkheads stick out of the terrain in front of the entrance to the building like pillars of an antique temple and the bogged in mud truck throws its headlights askew over an unplastered wall. First, Sonya thinks about the strange eyes of the vehicles, that radiate light instead of catching it, then about the souls of unborn humans that reside in rooms filled with pieces of bricks and construction debris, and finally about the satanic faces of construction workers charred with concrete dust and alcohol blizzard, men with yellow helms and women with faded headscarfs, that without any idea of the architectural plan, continue raising massive structures of human memories throughout the nights, made out of cosmic matter of dreams. Like vampires they slowly move along the masts of the cranes shouting out something in obscene language of the dead, their construction work has no end and it grows like a malicious tower of Babylon, forced to reach the cold silk of the clouds.

Ankle-deep in soggy mud, Sonya enters through the huge rusty gates and finds herself on the sandy square mashed out by the truck's wheels, next to the foundations of concrete pillars pierced by rusty rods that are used to bind the matter of concrete by the sorcery of the dead. At the side of the square on the

sandbank there is a burning pile of glass-wool, soaked in mazut, resembling a blackened corpse of a rhinoceros. Sonya gets covered by the shadow of the stacked white concrete slabs, carried through the air by the crane, and, facing upwards, she shouts her lungs out. Her voice corresponds to the screeching of chains and metal cables, rubbing against the edges of concrete slabs, and spotlight's bracings strained by the wild forces of the wind. It flies through the square eye sockets of unglazed windows and architects of their own deaths see the ghost of a seagull, carried away by the wind into the depths of stones, rising upwards from the soil, deeper than the starry sky above the head. An avalanche of piercing screams is an answer to it, faces are getting distorted by pain immeasurable to the living ones, pieces of bricks and sharp trowels poisoned by the construction mixture fall down on Sonya, blasts of sand surround her. Sonya takes her hair away from the temple of the head and the spot gets a direct hit of a quarter brick, a brick broken down by the fourteenth Christ – the Christ of construction workers and coal miners. Sonya stretches out her arms while falling to the back and galactic rivers accelerate their currents, washing over her face with ice cold water, translucent fishes filled with suspended light particles kiss her naked body and all forty eight directions of winds, only four of which are known to humans, open up in front of her and she sees the answer to her question.

She sees a geometric field covered in black marble, huge like an empty airfield, and in the middle of it - a four-sided pyramid of black glass, stairs carved out on its edges, and twelve magnificent braided

Komsomol[1] girls stand in symmetrically appropriate spots, holding torches, Komsomol badges on their black knee-length dresses, and the forest out of mirroring anthracite and the snow falling in-between tree trunks, covering the hair of countless rows of eternally saluting pioneers and three black lakes, tomb-like fog rises from their surface, and the black tower in-between, reflected in the mirroring surface of the sun's fire, concentrated into abyssal underground liquid, and the sun itself, hanging in the middle of the black skies, covered in stars and burning with flames on its outlines, but providing no light for the earth.

She hears the thunder of underground trains, running in pitch darkness, covered up from the eyesight with soil, a screeching tread of workshops vibrates there, converting chalk into salt, stone into bread, wood into human flesh. She recognizes the vastness that is hidden inside the earth, filled with cherry orchards, white domes and blooming fields, inaccessible to human senses because the light rapidly extinguishes in the mysterious and chilly spaces of their existence. She guesses the trace of the one who is on the search, the otherworldly look of his squinted eyes, and again she is captivated by the sizzling wish to see his face.

The workers bury Sonya on the left side of the building, if one stands with his back to the main entrance, at the bottom of the pit prepared for the next pile of the foundation for the building's extension. With her virgin child corpse Sonya shall solidify the structure and bless the chosen site as it ought to happen, following the ancient tradition of construction workers and coal miners whose crimes were

[1] Political youth organizations in the Soviet Union consisted of 3 stages: Octobrists (till age 9), Pioneers (till age 14), Komsomol (till age 28).

usually pinned on jews by the uninitiated ones. The foreman wants to disfigure the girl's face using a trowel to maintain secrecy, but then he contemplates that barely anybody will ever find her and her face will decompose anyhow, so they dig her in just like that and one of the female workers, who also has children, even coats Sonya with an old torn up quilted jacket, used to scare off the crows from the barrels with cooking tar, and turns the Sonya's head to where the sun is rising, not out of religious considerations but rather to avoid sand clogging her nose, anyhow nobody wiped away the blood and the crane operator, his face unrecognizable under the hat, just spits on Sonya aiming at her face, misses and swears in anger because the girl is already getting buried.

Work on the construction site stops around 2 at night, for about half an hour after that the workers torch the living cat, wired to the pile, and drink yellowish muddy liquid out of a 3 liter jar, pouring it into metal cups, tell different stories, smoke and eat sausage. Then they disperse to the wagons and have very rough group sex, tormenting their women who are much less in numbers than men. Meanwhile at this time, time that is outside of human perception because the man is either still sleeping or is already dead, Sonya crawls out of the sand pit and washes her face in the puddle, formed in the layout of a concrete block. She takes off her dirty stockings, damps them in the water and cleans her arms and legs. She washes the blood off her face and moists the hair stuck to the dissected temple. Sitting on the concrete, she shakes the sand out of her hair and spits it out of her mouth. Sonya feels no anger and in an inattentive way listens to the slams inside of metal wagons and the blissful cries of drunken broads rubbed by penises.

After she throws away her crumpled stockings into a tin of paint, Sonya puts her elbows on the knees and her cheeks to the palms and thinks about the present growing into the past and about the mysterious will of God, marked in the eternal book she dreamt of by the letter “ъ”. She imagines God in his wooden form that appears to her especially scary and worrying. Geometrically speaking God has no main direction because he grows out of nowhere into nowhere. Scorn at the omnipresence that is only based upon human understanding, Sonya localizes God in front of her and specifies him features of a gigantic werewolf that commands wind and rain. The mortality of God is of no question and in the future he is long since dead, but in the past that he created as a trap for living beings, there is no escape from him. Sonya understood how the unknown force rushes her towards the impenetrable wall of creation where God himself and the ones who control him will pulverize her living body into bloody grease and hair.

The pile of glass-wool on the construction site slowly extinguishes and the wind blows thin stinky smoke into the darkness of the night fields that unfold into infinity. Sonya jumps off the block, walks barefoot to the burned cat, wired to the pile, and warms her frosted feet in lukewarm ashes. The stars are shaking in the wind like christmas toys and the moon, made out of dried white stone, rests on the rooftop of the building.

Carrying a sharp rusty piece of iron, Sonya enters the dark wagon, bulky, sweaty, smelly humans are sleeping in it with their hands spread apart and their fingers thick on account of continuous work in concrete, she sees in the triangle of a projector light the unshaved face of a man, sleeping with his

mouth open, it fills out the whole light spot and therefore appears even larger, she raises the ironpiece with both of her hands and forces it through the eye of the sleeping human. The man twitches with his whole body, scratches his feet against the bunk bed and jerks his head, twisting the neck, his mouth wheezes loudly, meanwhile Sonya rotates her weapon inside the eye socket making a pulpy sound and the inky blood that she squeezes out of the head bubbles and flows down the human's face into the darkness. When Sonya understands that the man has already died, she takes out the covered in brain ironpiece and squats next to the second man, who sleeps while still sitting against the wall, his pants unzipped and a sausage-like cock sticks out of them. The man snores and moans in his sleep, probably dreaming of identical school girls playing in a darkened flat with flowers and other items of dead nature, then Sonya puts the sharp end against his eye and pushes it inside in a breath of aspiration. The man's upper torso strongly props forward as if he tried to reach a woman's body put in front of him, he jumps on his feet, throwing Sonya against the bulk bed with the force of a cattle, he pulls his stiffened neck together with the ironpiece out of her hands, dashes towards the opposite wall of the wagon, smashes against it, leans to the side, opens the door with his shoulder and drops out on the short stairs that lead into the abyss of the earth.

Indifferent to his fate Sonya finds an ax for chopping sausage next to the table and uses it instead of the ironpiece to kill the half awaken woman with a beautiful and insatiable face who tries to protect her belly with her calloused hands, idly inseminated by the dead men, when Sonya strikes her right on the head

and kills her with a second blow. Sitting on the female body, Sonya bites into the woman's neck and slowly sucks on blood that flows out in beats, sticking to the invigorating corpse with her belly and chest and sucking on it, she falls asleep and sinks into the dream, facing huge liquid flowers filled with ethereal colors of Eden’s garden.

Before dawn she wakes up and leaves her metal hollow, stepping on the crumbled corpse, as if on stairs, his cheek pushing down into the mud. Everything around her is still asleep, enveloped in stillness, and heavy time slowly descends into its bottomless whirlpool and the moon, having enjoyed the solitude, turned its ghastly back-face towards the earth. Sonya enters the unfinished building and, recognizing every step and each tool left there by workers, goes to the upper floor. It is a complete darkness inside the building, spotlights cannot reach into it, and Sonya’s shoulder from time to time touches the stinging and scorching fur of invisible animals that crawl on the walls. Water is flowing somewhere up there in an oncoming black height, those are the stars, seeping through the borderline of God’s dominion and slipping into eternity. There are no ceilings in the upper rooms and in the middle of one of those there is a big puddle glittering in the moonlight, Sonya washes her face and rinses her mouth that smells like blood. The yard terrain is visible from the window, spangled by naked trees, lanterns - extinguished in waters - and occasional cars.

Sonya stands up in the window frame and looks down indifferently at the pile of sand and the excavator, tilted on its slope. She takes a step forward, drops down a few meters with both her feet onto a cable, used to fixate a crane to the side of the building.

For a few seconds she searches for equilibrium, spreading her hands to the sides and balancing on the vibrating cable, venomous matter of rusty prop burning on her naked soles. Finally the cable and Sonya's body stop any vertical movement and, overtaken by the sucking one-dimensionality of space, Sonya easily walks up the cable towards the stairs on the crane, she climbs into the cabin and gets out on the mast that drones in the wind. Here, Sonya has to be precise and, standing on the tip of the mast, next to the gear wrapped in the crane's cable that smells like car oil, for a while she calculates the distance, then finally flies over to the nine-story high cornice of the next standing building. It is not an easy flight for her and for a long time she fights the wind while spreading out over cold tiles of the wall, streaming with clear night air, until she manages to jump down to the open balcony. Over here, swinging in the old wicker chair, covered by a torn up blanket, Sonya waits for the next night to continue her way.

In the flat, that belongs to the balcony she picked for her nest, live an old man and a woman, both decrepit and sick, the old man is still able to get outside and thus he buys in the store bread, kefir and noodles, which are then cooked into bland food by the old woman. The life of the old people flows almost with no sounds and the morning hours fill Sonya with tranquility. She looks at ravens fighting on the rooftops and pays no attention whatsoever to doctors and policemen downstairs as they draw with colored chalk around the corpses of the workers, slaughtered by her, cover them up with sheets, write down something in their notebooks, smoke poisonous cigarettes and finally drive off towards the blowing

wind, possibly in hope of finding Sonya somewhere there.

The autumn sun rises into the cold blue skies, shining in blinding flames like a living creature that prepares to jump down. Sonya shuts her eyes and sees a huge spruce, covered in non-colored electric lights, she feels the smell of warmed tar and glue on the wraps with christmas presents inside. Ded Moroz[2] in his red clothes with white collar comes through the window, opened to azure skies, carrying an engraved ax on his belt. He approaches Snegurochka[3] who stands next to the spruce and lifts her up in the air by the hair. Unable to play dead anymore, Snegurochka shivers and screams. Ded Moroz looks into her mouth and smashes her head hard against the wall with a crackling sound till the blood begins to flow out of Snegurochka's nose. She doesn't scream anymore, merely wheezing in hysteria with her mouth wide open, something mazut-like starts its gurgling flow from the nose of Ded Moroz into it, it causes Snegurochka to gag but the hands of Ded Moroz snap her head back and hold it tight by the braids and soon she quiets down and falls down on the floor when he lets her go, still shaking and twisting like a lizard. Ded Moroz takes off his hat and everybody sees: he has the head of a chicken. The children get scared and run away, only Sonya stays, she approaches Ded Moroz and pulls on his sleeve, asking for a gift. But Ded Moroz just keeps looking at her with his chicken head, squinting his eyes in a taunt.

Sonya opens her eyes and sees the old man outside on the balcony in search of a jar of pickles he himself ate 2 years ago. Instead of pickles he discovered

[2] "Old Man Frost". Character of slavic mythology that appears on the new year's eve to give presents, similar to Santa Claus.

[3] "The Snow Maiden". Granddaughter of Ded Moroz accompanying him in his tasks.

Sonya and got somewhat surprised, because he forgot how she managed to get on his balcony.

- My name is Sonya. Sonya Pavlovna, - declares Sonya, while standing up from the chair. – I came to pay you a visit.
- The store that sold kefir got closed. – gravely answers the old man and begins to crawl back into the room. – Now we'll make our own kefir.
- That's a good thing, – Sonya cheers him.
- And what have they done to the bread? They made soup out of it. Soviet authority! – the old man shuts the balcony door behind Sonya. – So we buy soup. Now we will make our own out of kefir.
- That's a good thing, - says Sonya once again, stretching her legs on the floor, covered in hair, dust and cockroaches. – Do you have a cat?

The old man overhears the question and looks with his watery eyes into Sonya's mouth just like Ded Moroz looked into Snegurochkas mouth in Sonya's dream and now Sonya understands why. There is no need for her to repeat the question because a skinny gray cat enters the room and sniffs Sonya's legs, looking for food.

After a while the old man and Sonya drink tea in a small smoke-filled room with burned oilcloth covering the table and chipped sink with a stinky rug in it. The cat strolls around Sonya's legs, asking for food, and Sonya realizes that it only feeds on cockroaches.

- And what do cockroaches eat here? – asks Sonya.
- What do they eat, they eat bread, they eat kefir, they eat noodles, - answers the old man. – They eat the bagel. – adds he, turning to the empty bread box with half of a bagel inside. – Take a bagel, child, you have young teeth.

Sonya takes the ossified bagel, some cuts are visible on its side like imprints of prehistoric ferns on

stones compressed by earth, and puts it next to the cup of pale sugarless tea. The bagel is surely older than the cat.

- Grandpa, do you remember Lenin? – she asks while looking into the muddy window.
- I've never seen Lenin alive. He died before my time.
- Why did he die?
- I don't know, child. Got sick and died. I'll get sick and die. You too will get sick and die, yet you are still young.
- I don't believe that Lenin died, - says Sonya while looking into the window and scratching the oilcloth. – Grandpa, they merely wrote it for you in a newspaper.
- Died, my darling. Died, the old horsy. Whatever human there is, he'll still die like a donkey. Like Lenin, like my old woman.
- Your old woman will surely die, - Sonya reasons in certainty. – But Lenin will live forever.
- You, girl, still are a pioneer, - the old man is surprised.
- Yes, they didn't manage to take me into Komsomol yet.
- So where is your red tie then?
- I couldn't find my tie anymore, - Sonya angrily picks through the oilcloth. – I wish to find Lenin.
- Hah, Lenin says she. Go to the mausoleum, there lies your Lenin, still as a log and with a lamp in his head.
- You, grandpa, are old but still talk silly. God can eat you for such silliness.
- God won't eat me, I don't believe in him. If there was a God, he wouldn't let soup be made out

of kefir. My old woman, though, she believes in God, so he will eat her, - at those last words the old man tries to laugh but is only able to make a thick hiss.

- Your reasoning is wrong, grandpa, - patiently explains Sonya. – It will all happen very differently. It’s not God who will eat your old woman but instead your old woman will eat you after she dies. And regarding Lenin you’re wrong, he hasn’t died at all, he’s still alive nowadays, it’s just that you haven’t seen him.
- Then who’s lying in the coffin if not him, eh? I went to him, brought a crust of bread in my pocket, he smells like poison, like a turtle in the museum. – the old man gets angry and blows on the stenchy soviet cigarette “Vatra”.
- Lenin got out of his coffin and walked away and they have put a puppet in there instead, so everybody would think he has died, – says Sonya. – I know the place the real Lenin lives in, but I can’t find this place. There supposed to be black lakes. They’re deep like wells because indeed they’re holes in the earth. Also a stone forest is there, like a mirror, and the snow is falling. Do you know such place, grandpa?
- There’s no such place on this earth and you, child, should get some jabs to the back of the head. My old woman also went to the hospital, back in the days, but she can’t walk anymore.
- And the “old woman”, as you call her, she also doesn’t know where Lenin lives or she’s just pretending?
- What got into you, who told you about Lenin?
- But you, grandpa, have quickly forgotten Lenin.
- It’s hard for me to remember, I’m old.

- But he remembers you, though he’s already more than a hundred years old. He sees you here, eating bread and kefir. And you don’t see him. You don’t even have his portrait. It’s easy to notice that you, grandpa, are an old communist, however still a scumbag. Because you don’t believe in communism and have probably never ever believed in it.
- You’re a scumbag yourself, - hoarsely speaks the old man, slowly smoking a cigarette with his knotty veiny fingers. – I’d kill you.
- The reason you want to do it is so that I won’t remind you about your youth and the bright communism. I’ll take the cat from you, you have no food for it anyhow and I can even pay for it, if you want, - Sonya takes crumpled money out of the chest pocket of her concrete-smeared blouse and puts it on the table.
- I suppose you’ll get rid of the cat, - sullenly says the old man and helpless sorrow is visible in his eyes.

Sonya uses her legs to push back the chair, takes the cat and walks along the hallway into the bedroom, the old woman, overtaken by illness, sits in the armchair and looks out of the window. Next to the armchair sitting on the table are her glasses and a folded newspaper.

- Hello, grandma, - says Sonya, puts the cat on the floor, gets to the back of the armchair, takes the scarf from the dressing table and skillfully puts it over the old woman’s head onto her neck. The oedematous face of the old woman engorges, she hisses, trying to catch the lacking air with her mouth. From the side Sonya looks closely at her bulging eyes. – Well, grandma, do you see

black lakes? – asks Sonya and lets the scarf a bit loose, the old woman convulsively tries to catch it with her hands.

- FFIii fffseee, ffffgrandchffffild, - she whimpers barely audible.
- How about stone forest? – again pulling the scarf, Sonya puts her knee against the armchair to achieve some additional prop. The old woman makes faces and only thinks about her death. As Sonya lets the scarf loose for another time, the brain of the old woman, filled with sick blackened blood, doesn’t want to reconnect to her other organs anymore.
- Butchfffer ffffssshop, - the old woman says her last words. Her hands fall on the abdomen. Sonya takes the scarf from under the drooping head and returns it to the dressing table. Leaning at the old woman’s face, Sonya slightly spreads her open toothless mouth and spits into it. Then she catches the cat, walks to the window, climbs at the sill, opens it and throws the cat out from the ninth floor. Done with that, Sonya closes the window and leaves the flat, noticing the old man still sitting on the same spot in the kitchen, smoking a cigarette.
- Goodbye, - says Sonya from the door sill. The old man doesn’t hear her, diving into memories about his youth and the bright communism.

After taking down the elevator, scratched over by nails, Sonya finds the cat’s corpse crashed on the asphalt, blood flows out from its mouth and the hide on its belly is ruptured. Squatting next to it, Sonya takes the heart out of the cat and bites off the arteries. Then she hides the heart inside of her mouth and walks away through sunny cold

courtyards, walking in this direction for a very long time - one reaches the northern sea.

And if anyone would harm them, fire pours from their mouth and consumes their foes.
If anyone would harm them, this is how he is doomed to be killed.

Revelation 11.5

Oil lakes

Natasha's father was a construction worker and her mother – a nurse. When Natasha was nine years old her father busted his abdomen while carrying stones and died in the hospital. There were few people at his funeral but trampled flowers were rotting on the black wet asphalt and on the stairs leading to the front door. Natasha thought they were gifts to her mother, she collected them in the evening with a cardboard box and put them into a jug. But her mother threw the flowers away and soon she married for the second time, a smoke-stenched man who received treatment in her hospital. Natasha did not love her mom's new husband and refused to call him "dad", for that the mother has been hitting her face with a firm palm.

In the fourth grade Natasha began to smoke and in the fifth, at the birthday party of her classmate Vitya – to lead a sex life. However her favorite thing to do was to dance at the disco and drink vodka. She often got drunk, instinctively trying to understand the essence of things, and got in fights with her female friends, pulling them by the hair. After the eighth grade she went to a vocational school to finish building the house her father couldn't. In the vocational school she had two abortions and, after finishing it, she went to work at the construction

site. Natasha indulged men only for bed purposes but actually hated them, and all men called her “slut”. In the last evening of her life she got heavily drunk on moonshine and let her coworkers Dima and Tolik inseminate herself in a long mind-numbing action on the bunk bed of a dark wagon. During the insemination all three behaved like animals, roared, howled and hit their heads against inanimate objects, swore and even tore apart Natasha’s t-shirt. Natasha dived into a faint-like sleep, sweaty and tired of multiple receptions of seed, her awakening was horrifying. Out of it she only remembered the face of a beautiful blonde haired girl with her gaze fixed, like holes in an electric socket, and the dread of death that sank in her head with its sharp bird claws.

Natasha lies naked on the ice-cold table, wholy concealed by a cellophane cover. There is frosting settled on it. A terrifying white lamp shines someplace above. Natasha thinks she is already on the other side. Inhuman frost stands in front of her like a church with its many bell towers rising upwards. Natasha’s lips start to move, remembering her accomplished sins. Because of the confession she gets very nauseous. Someone’s strong hands lift Natasha up by her arms and legs, carry her away from the light into darkness, put her with the stomach onto cold metal and strip off the cover.

- So what do you think of the bride? – asks the hoarse man’s voice. – No need to warm her up, she hasn’t stiffened yet. Not too many freckles on her. So lifelike.
- Should’ve stiffened already a while ago, - answers the younger voice. – Without freckles, what a girl. Ouch, cold bitch!

- Yeah, this one is not the warming kind, – laughs the older one. – Let’s do her both at the same time?
- You know I can’t stand it, - speaks the young one in disdain. – Let me go first, then you can carve her body with a scalpel, can’t help yourself eh, always carving bodies with a scalpel.
- Is there even sex without a scalpel? – the old one agrees and slowly walks away, whistling and crunching with his boots over a dirt-stained linoleum.

The young one takes Natasha’s body, so heavy it is in death, drags her by the ankles with her stomach at the table side and puts her legs down. Then he pulls down his trousers and leans on Natasha’s bottom, while quietly calling her “Lyudmila”. In a swift turn Natasha grabs him by the throat and begins to choke. He tries to push her away from himself but she smashes her forehead, moisty as a result of evaporating frosting, into his nose bridge while looking straight into his eyes. Blood flows out of the man’s nose, his eyes roll up. When he stops breathing Natasha lets him drop off with his chest on the table, bends over and vomits in disgust a dark cadaver slime, emitting barking sounds.

There is a table nearby, an old man's corpse covered in multiple darkened knife wounds on top of it, the old man who didn’t believe in the eternal life of Lenin. After Sonya went away the old man kept sitting in the kitchen for a long time, then he went to the old woman, so she could remind him how he had been called twenty years ago. Something heavy jumped over him in the corridor, threw him off his feet and began to claw and gnaw on his face with a toothless mouth. The old man remembered Sonya's words and started

hitting the old woman with his weak fists. But the old woman overwhelmed him and he died, already rest assured in Sonya's rightness. The old woman brought a knife from the kitchen and ate the old man raw, recalling that forgotten taste of meat, then went to the balcony with a knife and a bloody piece of flesh in her mouth, rolled over the railing thinking she could fly, and fell down, crushing her head and thus acquiring eternal peace.

Natasha takes the sweater off the dead man and puts it on herself. The pants are too nasty for her and, half naked, she drags the man into the freezing chamber and breaks the white lamp with her fist. After picking corpses: three men, one woman and one boy, Natasha submits to an unknown desire, climbs on top of them and releases her vomit into their mouths. When the partner of the killed one arrives, carrying a flashlight, Natasha doesn’t let him turn on the emergency lights and attacks from behind, holding one hand at his throat and squeezing out his eyes with the second one. Howling like a monkey, the man falls down on the floor, dropping the flashlight, and, using all her force, Natasha kicks with her foot on his head until his neck cracks with a rapid crunching sound.

At five o’clock in the morning a group of dead men of both sexes appears in the morgue’s yard, a tall bald man armed with an ax, a woman in a sweater, Natasha as she is, in her hands - a long metal hook made for hauling corpses. A second woman with a burn mark on her face wraps herself in a dark plaid, and a man with a limp leg because of an absent piece of foot walks the last. They get inside the van which is used as a catafalque, the limping one is behind the steering wheel, Natasha on the front seat next to him, then they drive off to the outskirts of the city in the

direction of a chemical factory that has stopped its environmental pollution long time ago due to economic reasons. They drive along dark empty streets, the driver strictly holds to the lane, Natasha leans on the back of the seat, relaxed and unfastened by a seat belt, staring blankly at the flickering street lights.

All that has happened seems strange to Natasha but doesn't frighten her, probably because she doesn't believe in her death she cannot find any reason to. Lazily raising her hand, she touches the wound on her head and puts her fingers inside of it. On the back seat one of the men resurrected by Natasha begins to wheeze, bend in half on the dirty floor of the van, he gasps in pain that devours his rotten guts. His wheezing sound switches to a numbed roar, the man hits with his head against the hull of the car and crawls on his side among his silent comrades.

- Hold on, - says Natasha to the driver and the van stops on the roadside of an empty avenue.

A drunk man in an unzipped coat staggers along the sidewalk. Natasha grabs her hook with one hand, takes the bucket from under her feet with another one and gets out to the covered in red leaves square of wet soil under the maple tree. Right away the man notices the half naked woman with a hook and a bucket, approaching him in the dim street light, and he doesn't like what he sees but explains it with his extreme alcohol intoxication and merely tries to run away into the depth of an unknown alley. Natasha speeds up her steps, easily reaches her victim and hits him with a hook on his head. The man falls down and Natasha thoroughly smashes his head in well-aimed blows of the hook. Sitting on the asphalt and licking her lips, she puts a bucket under the stream of blood and looks over the dark windows of the houses. That

spot, where she milks her murder victim, is at a distance from the light of a street lamp, so even if someone is awake - they cannot see the expression in her eyes.

The driver drinks first, gulping in a gross manner, as the van starts to move Natasha passes the bucket to the back. The woman wrapped in the plaid pours some into the empty tin can, the grim boy scoops it with his palms and cringes, the rest goes to the bold man who slurps it in, and the one gasping on the floor cannot take part in the meal anymore, something thick and stinky that looks like pieces of decayed organs comes out of his mouth and his roar chokes on this revolting matter, turning into slithering seethe. At almost twilight time, around six in the morning, the van stops next to the crumbling concrete fence of the chemical factory.

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Sonya came to the factory by foot, for that she required a lot of time, but time was of little matter to her, she also got delayed in one of the new districts in order to kill in the hallway of the house Nadya, who studied in the seventh grade and was getting back from school, for the purpose of acquiring her shoes and stockings to not stand out with bare feet. The shoes were somewhat too big for Sonya but she liked their shape and black color. The stockings were body-colored, which Sonya did not like, in addition also torn on the back side of the right hip. However Nadya wore a long school dress, so nobody could notice the hole when she was still alive. Sonya approached her next to the elevator, grabbed at once

with both hands at her hair and smashed her head against the wall. Inside the elevator Sonya put the unconscious schoolgirl in a sitting position and cracked her neck by taking a kick on her chin. Then she went to the last floor, dragged Nadya up the metal stairs to the roof and there, in between the skies and the earth, took off the shoes and stockings, took a black marker out of the school backpack, pulled a sheet out of the notebook and wrote on it in big letters in Nadyas handwriting: “I want to stay virgin forever. Nadya”, she put the sheet next to the corpse on the hard tar of the roof. Then she drew a cross on the dead girl’s forehead.

Done with that sacrilege, Sonya walked along the roof to the other side of the building and flew over to the next one in her usual manner. It was good to fly in those new shoes. Sonya went very far from her last crime spot, moving over the rooftops of identical buildings just as if they were made for her kind, the ones that are, unlike birds, unable to fly upwards, after that she descended to the ground and continued her way.

Having no real need for sleep, at around six in the evening Sonya still climbed an old and tall linden, the mistletoes in its branches grew together in a greenish lump that served as a nest for all kinds of filth from the immemorial time on. After placing herself comfortably on a twisted branch, Sonya fell asleep with her eyes open, watching over windows in the house in front of her that lit up and went out in an alternate manner, replicating in an accelerated rhythm the fate of grand space lanterns. The wind has been carrying rustling sheets of unread newspapers over the asphalted earth, whirling and crumpling them high above the ground. It got dark a while ago,

sparsely placed pink street lamps lit up. Their sorrowful, pale and somewhat bleak light illuminates flat streets in between the buildings, black courtyards with silhouettes of half naked trees, dumpsters and broken benches, no one except for cats sits on them because of the cold, that light evokes a feeling of limitless death and solitude Sonya loves so very much. Those empty spaces between the buildings reminded her the squeezing suspense that took over her in the childhood when she went to visit her friend, looking at starry skies, shivering from the cold and thinking about the gloves she forgot at home, about the beauty of autumn maple trees behind the fence of a kindergarten, about alienating darkness of canyon-like streets that fall into all cardinal directions resembling the unknown future of her own fate. She met people, blinded by the wind, with unrecognizable alien faces, like shadows sliding over the walls of the buildings, they came from nowhere and rushed into nothingness as if carried by the wind, their incomprehensible dark life appeared to Sonya being her future life as well, she got scared and little stingy goosebumps crawled between her shoulder blades. In the dark hallway of the house her friend lived in, grown ups were gathering in the evenings, red sparkles of cigarettes swirling in rounds, lovers licking each other's open mouths with their moist tongues, sounds of guitars and smells of wine. As she called the elevator, Sonya pressed herself into its frame, shivering when somebody passed by her walking the stairs, as if they could take and drag her off into the dark staircases towards the black sky, where those werewolves live in their caves carved into the iceberg of time. Once a young man walking down the stairs noticed Sonya, stopped and asked her name and Sonya

exposed her name waiting for the elevator in a torment, the man quietly laughed, dousing Sonya in wine fumes, took her by the shoulders and kissed on the forehead and his lips burned Sonya with a chill of eternal damnation and inverted underground churches. And then Sonya understood that the Devil loves her.

At half past seven Sonya spat out the cat's heart, she sucked out dry, picked a moment when nobody was around, got down from the tree and began to pester bypassers, asking where the butcher shop is. Finally a woman, a bank clerk, with her lips covered in a violet lipstick and strong odor of perfume and shampoo, showed her the way because she often visited the butcher shop herself to buy some mutton for her horrific children.

When Sonya entered the shop there was nobody in it except for the butcher by the name of Kolya, who, from the moment he saw Sonya, imagined her lying naked with her stomach on the cutting table. Sonya came closer to the counter and began examining the meat that was hanging behind it on the wall. She closely examined the meat in silence, as if it would be an art object. Kolya kept silent too, his strong hands crossed on the chest, while in his imagination he carefully quartered Sonya with a big cleaver, grilled pieces of her body on a skewer and ate them. The desire to undress, brutally rape, stab, chop up and eat the little girl standing in front of him overwhelmed the slothful bear-like essence of Kolya to such an extent, that he could hardly resist an impulse to right away grab Sonya’s hair with one of his hands, covered in blood and grease of a cattle, and begin his cleaving business with the second one.

The girl’s beautiful lively eyes, that slowly crawled over the chopped up bloody carcasses, were especially

alluring for Kolya and even made him gulp on saliva. Except for that he saw in front of himself her body, hooked by its mouth and sliced up on the frontal side, blueish breathing organs are clearly visible, leading from the head of the girl, tilted upwards, towards the lungs, the girl's hair is smeared in sticky red matter and what's left of the blood, some last drops of it, flows down the legs of Sonya into the puddle on the floor.

- Tell me, are there any black lakes in the area? - suddenly asked Sonya and a shiver passed through Kolya's heavy body. He gave Sonya a dull stare, slightly opening his mouth. - I need to find black lakes, - distinctly repeated Sonya while looking straight into his watery eyes.

Vague fear came upon Kolya. Before he thought nobody except for him knows about black lakes, bottomless holes in the grassland of suburb tundra, at night time he dropped his filthy pieces of craftsmanship into them, made out of bones and entrails of shredded children and filled with cattle blood he bought in the slaughterhouse, trying to replace the blood of the little creatures he spilled. He believed that there are mighty demons living in those black-glazed stone towers amidst the lakes that admire his gifts, and in return they will reward him with the powers to become immortal.

- Did you eat human flesh? - asked Sonya in a grim menacing tone. - Cooked some broth out of children's ribs? Made a potato stew out of the first-grader's liver? Answer me, bastard.

Kolya grabbed an ax from the table and threw it to Sonya's head but missed, as Sonya took a step to the side, and the ax hit the stone wall of the shop, leaving a fist-size hole in its bricks.

- I’ll make some noodle stew with your brain, - roared Kolya and moved at Sonya with a knife in his hand, cutting off the path to the exit door he had already bolted shut. - With your sweet brains, little bunny.

But Sonya had no intent to run away whatsoever.

- Better tell when still asked nicely, - she asked Kolya in a kind voice. - Or I’ll make a cripple out of you, maybe even kill you.
- About a week ago my wife Ljusya made dumplings out of one girl, - Kolya held still to recall the case. - Turned out to be very good dumplings, but we’re out of them already. And you won’t make any tasty dumplings, you only suit for meatballs. Or stuffed paprika. When I see a child I can tell right away how it should be cooked.

Kolya wanted to keep moving further but he did not make it, because Sonya spent a third of the cat's soul to launch a cup-width beam of fire out of her mouth right into his stomach, it burned through Kolya and propelled a fountain of blood and cooked belly fat from his backside. Kolya dropped the knife and fell on his back to the shop’s floor, his hands gripping at the belly. After an exhaust of stenchy vapor, boiling bubbling blood mixed with contents of the bowel began to flow through his palms.

- AAAAaaaaa! - screamed Kolya out of pain and fear for his guts.
- So, where are the lakes? - quietly repeated Sonya her first question, bending towards the distorted face of the butcher. - If you’ll tell me I’ll heal you.
- City outskirts… in the fields… close to the chemical factory… - squeals Kolya while trying to point a direction with his forehead.

- In what cardinal direction? To the north?

Instead of answering Kolya started to roll from side to side and continued his beasty howl.

- Facing the direction of the rising sun, - slowly spoke Sonya, - Where do I go?
- To the left, - roared Kolya. His distorted face started to take a deadly tone.
- To the north then.
- Help me, girl… help me, girl… - hoarsely squeaks Kolya, snapping back his head out of torturing brutal pain.
- Of course I'll help you, just as I promised, - calmly answers Sonya. - Take your hands off.

Hesitantly, Kolya took his shaking palms off the bloody ragged hole in the stomach. His eyes, watery in pain, were plaintively looking at Sonya. She kicked him hard into the unprotected bleeding belly. The hit made a short watery sound and sparked a bloody mist out of the wet creased mess on Kolya's stomach. A howl of Kolya, who once again grabbed at the belly and pulled up his legs, shook the walls of the butcher shop.

- You'll be dead by night, - stated Sonya, turning away to the door. - And you won't eat human flesh anymore.

After those words Sonya opened the bolt lock, stepped outside to the dark wind blowing in her face and turned right off into the archway. Some person that had been standing on the street, went after her but did not find a soul in the dark passage.

Deep at night, tired after the long travel and the butcher fight, Sonya reaches the chemical factory. It stands out among the dark autumn fields like a monstrous antique city, falling deep into the abyss of a shattered time. The starry sky thickens over huge

cylinders of gas storage facilities and ruins of dead workshops. Sonya finds a hole in the barbed fence and sneaks into the inner yard. Dismal buildings smell like moisture and some kind of caustic gas that makes Sonya's throat sore. She almost steps on the dog's corpse, half-sunk in the sand in the middle of the yard like a dead fish, trying to dive out of the ground. A dreary lonely wind howls among the tilted tanks on rusted piles and the long three story building with broken windows.

There is another building parallel to this one and, following the pathway between them, Sonya reaches the central square where the main workshop, massive like a cathedral, raises its pipes into the skies and extends all around the area. The smell gets more intense over here. Sonya sits down on a rusty pipe, covered in sand, and begins to think.

While she is thinking a shadow appears from the main workshop and creeps on Sonya while keeping to the wall. This is a former student of the vocational school number twelve, Alexey, once upon a time he got into the main workshop to test a bomb of mass destruction he made with his own hands, but then he took a wrong step and fell down the draining shaft into the basement, flying for the whole thirty-seven meters along the metal well, like Alice heading to Wonderland. Right before the terrible hit on the floor Alexey saw a gargantuan figure of a dead Red Army soldier riding a gargantuan war horse, hits of its stone hooves shaking the spongy marshes of the night fields. The boy's brain has splattered all over the walls and the floor at a significant distance from where he fell down and there was nobody who could lick it off, even rats that got adapted to the factory could not get into the poisonous drainage. Chemical

substances have been pouring into the drainage for many years, they fossilized into a sediment on the floor and reacted with water, producing toxic vapors that filled the entire building of the main workshop, creating a layer of barely visible trailing greenish mist over the territory of the factory right up to the city outskirts, being the reason for the residents of those outskirts to give birth to babies without arms, legs or even heads. However, that poison had a beneficial effect on Alexey, in a few days he got reanimated, got up his feet and got lost in the dark labyrinths of drainage for many months, feeding on rats and insects. At last he found a rusty door which was used by workers on suicide missions to get down the drainage and unclog it, he got out to the basement level of the workshop and began his life there. Alexey killed children that were wandering in the abandoned industrial zone, or dogs that in the course of a dog walk ran off too far from their owners, he preserved them in poison and ate them piece by piece. During the springtime he killed a girl with a brick and dragged her to the place of his second birth and very soon she raised indeed, however she could not move one of her arms, it shrunk and fell off halfway to the shoulder so a bended rusty piece of iron had to be fixed instead of it with the help of a metal wire, but Alexey did not mind it and soon Tanya, that was the girl’s name, became his trusted friend for life. In time the older sister of Tanya she missed very much, Ljuba, joined them, and later so did Alexey’s former friend Kostik, so now there were four of them.

While Alexey sneaks up on Sonya, on the second floor of the main workshop Ljuba sits next to the rusty tin can with blueish fire and guts rats she caught in the underground, and one-armed Tanya together with Kostik

went to the fields in search of the carrion. Keeping a few meters away from Sonya, Alexey takes out of his withered jacket a chain piece with a nut attached to its end, using it he intends to murder the girl that sits on the pipe. The chain makes a tiny clank, barely audible in the blowing wind, and Sonya turns her head to the dark stripe next to the wall of the building Alexey is hiding in. Her eyes emit some kind of an odd glow, invisible to regular humans, it makes Alexey feel unease. Suddenly immense dread fills him, dread towards some kind of a blood-chilling torment unknown to him. He cannot imagine who and how is going to torture him and only feels more scared because of that. And then he understands - those are Sonya's thoughts, which he can hear due to the poison effects, like he could sometimes hear thoughts of rats running away from him into darkness.

Alexey wheezes, the weapon drops out of his hand. Chill enters his rotten body as if he would be diving into an ice-hole. And again he hears the earth-shaking steps of a gargantuan horse that walks the fields with skulls on its harness. Sonya's eyes are coming closer. He wants to scream but he can't.

- Hello, Aljosha, - says Sonya.

Meanwhile Alexey continues hearing her thoughts, untranslatable into words, although he wishes to stop hearing them, he is frozen still and cannot withdraw himself from them. Those are the sounds of unfamiliar language, black dots and lines on brown cloth, language that is spoken by creatures whose mother is death herself. Sonya smiles and this smile shakes Alexey to such an extent, that a thin stripe of dark ichor begins to drool out of his mouth.

- Go away you fiend, - he speaks in a stranger's voice, barely able to move his lips.

- Why all the swearing, dear Aljosha, - kindly says Sonya while touching his dirty clotted hair with her hand. - No need to swear, better tell me how do you live here. What do you do here on long cold evenings, who are your friends, dear Aljosha, tell me, I really want to know.
- Eating rats, - Alexey manages to squeeze out of himself. - Eating dogs. Dead ones.
- Very good, - smiles Sonya. - And who is the girl that fries rats over there upstairs behind the wall?
- Ljubka. I murdered her. With a nut. Then she got back to life in the shaft. And Tan’ka I murdered with a brick. And Kostik we murdered together with Tan’ka with bricks. Then they got back to life in the shaft as well.
- Very good. And who lives there in the shaft?
- Nobody, - says Alexey and for some reason his lips instead of blue turn the color of white-plaqued plums.
- Very good. And how come in your opinion corpses there get back to life?
- Heck if I know.
- Alright let's go eat some rats, - Sonya grabs the nut from the floor and gives it to Alexey. - Here, don’t forget it.

Soon Sonya, Alexey and Ljuba sit on the metal ground on the second floor in the main workshop, eat grilled rats and throw bones through the railing down to the first floor. Ljuba has no upper lip because it has rotted away. She puts her bottom lip to the upper teeth while speaking.

- So then I hit him with a nut on his head and killed him, - Alexey continues the story,- And if he wouldn’t stumble and fall down, I’d lure him

into the underground floor and kill him there. The man was huge.

- We've been eating him for two weeks, - adds Ljuba in a shy manner while sucking on a rat's bone.
- Police came afterwards but we waited it out in the pit. Nobody would go to the pit. You'll die there. Kostik crafted a crossbow that shoots nails so he sticks them overnight into the floor of the pit. Like that he recently killed a huge hound. It died in a second, didn't even howl.
- And Tan'ka has a poisoned crowbar, - again adds Ljuba. - She can make very precise throws with it, right to the head.
- Nice life you have here, - states Sonya, leaning with her back to the wall of the workshop. - It's because you're all friends.

There comes silence only interrupted by crunchies and munchies of the eaters gathered around the fire.

- So who are you yourself? - asks Alexey, feeling uneasy at the question.
- My name is Sonya. I came here from far away lands to find Lenin.
- And where does this Lenin live? - asks Ljuba.
- The way to him goes through the field with no sunshine, through the stone forest and the black lakes.
- The black lakes are right here, - Ljuba cheers up. - Close to the factory. Here, it's their water burning in the tin.
- And is there a tower in the middle of the lakes?
- The tower is there as well. Pitch black, - Ljuba finishes eating her rat and wipes her hands on the dress.

Sonya looks in contemplation at her dirty naked legs, stretched out on the floor.

- Then the first spooky talisman has to be buried somewhere around here, - says she in a bleak voice. - K-Z-Z-K.
- And what is it? - quietly asks Ljuba, feeling that things are about to get really bad.
- It’s a mystery. But we must find it, my little friends, - Sonya glances at the kids sitting still in the light of the black water. - We must find it before the talisman guardian kills us.
- Who is that talisman guardian?, - Alexey engages in the conversation. A cramp comes over his rotten insides. It would be better for him to never encounter Sonya.
- I don’t know exactly, - shrugs Sonya. - But someone very powerful.
- I saw him, - Alexey speaks in a wheezing voice. - It’s an enormous man on a horse. When he rides the whole earth is shaking. And he has a fire saber in his hand, huge like a poplar tree.

Sonya closes her eyes, trying not to think of the guardian. A strong gust of wind fans the flames in the tin. Sonya turns vigilant.

- It seems they follow my tracks.
- Who? - Alexey looks into the black hole of the window.
- Vampires, - grimly answers Sonya and, without opening her eyes, takes off the shoes. - We have to fight them.

After sending Ljuba to search for Kostik and one-armed Tanya, Sonya and Alexey get out to the central square in front of the main workshop. A starry sky envelopes them, the wind swirls in its vastness, it captures shadow-like dark pieces of all sorts of matter, tears them off the ground and lifts them upwards in spirals. For many long minutes, extended by

the warping of the worlds, they stand still, a massive gloomy building is in the background, they stand and gaze at the skies, a girl and a boy.

- They’re already here, - finally speaks Sonya, having no wish to talk about eternity. - It will be a tough battle.
- Maybe we should hide in the pit? - wheezily proposes Alexey.
- Why are you wheezing, Aljosha? - asks Sonya in a caring tone.
- Throat got all shrinked because of the poison, - grimly answers Alexey, rubbing his dirty hand against the throat. - We eat poison and meat together. To strengthen the body.

On the other side of the pathway, between the warehouses from where Sonya came, one can see the outlines of vampires heading towards them. Natasha with her hook walks up in the front, slightly behind her - the limping driver in an improvised skirt out of oilcloth with a broken piece of metal in his hand and a flattened bucket on his head that acts like a helmet. Next are: the large bald man with no clothes armed with an ax, and the woman wrapped in plaid with a burn mark over the half of her face, she holds a piece of rusty pipe in her right hand. The boy who picked up a rock at the roadside concludes the procession. The sixth vampire that suffered in the van due to his guts is already decaying in a ditch.

Sonya waits for them to come closer, illuminating the space in front of herself with a tin can of black water she holds in her hand. As Natasha makes it to the middle of the pathway, she notices Sonya, emits a savage snarl and begins to run. The rest of the vampires try to keep up with the pack leader.

When Natasha reaches Sonya Alexey backs away to the side, and Sonya splashes onto her chest some burning black water. Natasha’s sweater engulfs in flames and the hook hits the ground next to Sonya who manages to jump aside. Natasha begins to spin around roaring viciously and taking blind swings, some of them crash into the wall of the workshop and chip brick pieces off it. Sonya backpedals into the building, the roaring bald man with the ax follows her up. After dodging an ax’s blow Sonya runs up the echoing metal stairs. In a heavy rumble the vampire chases her. At the curve of the stairs Sonya swiftly turns around and opens her palm, blinding light bursts out of it with a hissing sound. The body of the bald one stumbles down and falls on Sonya in a furious roar, both fly off the stairs but Sonya manages to wriggle herself out from under the vampire and he drops like a stone on the concrete of the underground floor, breaks through the railing of the hole with his back and crashes down to its bottom. Sonya makes a small round through the air, descends next to him and picks up the ax that dropped to the side. In that hit against the solid breast of concrete slabs the bald one breaks two ribs and a hand, emits a faint roar and barely manages to get on his four. Then Sonya hacks on him waging an ax with both of her hands above the head. The back of his head makes a crackling sound under the strike of the ax and the convulsing body of the vampire drops to the ground. In hasty blows of the ax Sonya chops through the thick neck, while putting her legs wide apart to support herself.

While climbing the stairs, Sonya listens to the horrific screech of Natasha who is rolling on the floor, engulfed in fire curse of poisoned lakes, and to the clashes of metal against metal along the roars

of limping driver and low growls of Alexey. The half-faced woman separates herself from the dark wall and swings her pipe, as if it were a scythe, right at the spot where Sonya's head was just a moment ago. The pipe clanks against the wall like a bell. Sonya ducks behind the railing, snaps her hand and, using a fire blade, splits the woman's bowels together with a plaid. Dark slime streams over the feet of Sonya, the woman sways, lifts the pipe with both hands above the head and falls forwards on her face, dropping the weapon. Inextinguishable pain tears on Sonya’s hand, she writhes and for a while she cannot stand up to begin chopping off the long haired head.

When she finally reaches the square, Alexey, wounded by the ironpiece to the shoulder, climbs up the stack of rusty pipes towards the broken window, chased by the limping driver with a bucket on his head. The bucket already twice saved the limping one from the blow of the nut, however the boy with the rock did not escape it and fell back, trying to pick a piece of a bone out of the head that got crushed by the nut. In his time the boy died of a knife stab to his side, a trace in the form of a dark bruise is still visible on his naked body. Sonya catches up with the hobbling teenager and hits his head with an ax in a short muted growl, chopping off a part of the arm that he stuck in it. The boy crouches down from the blow and takes a kick to the bruised side which knocks him off the feet. A slicing swish of an ax and a crackling sound of the blade, crushing against the back of the head, finish the duel.

Yet Alexey’s fortune is sad, he doesn’t manage to get to the window in time and the limping one reaches him with an ironpiece on his spine, Alexey rolls down the stack of pipes, breaking his shoulder and kicking out

his teeth. Sonya could have helped him, but Natasha, covered in charred pieces of sweater stuck to the melted skin and flesh, finally shaked off the flames and now again begins her snarling attack. Sonya backs away, accumulating the last remains of the cat's energy, but suddenly hears a quick battle whistle and a crowbar, thrown by one-handed Tanya, hits Natasha in the head. Natasha barely manages to keep on her feet and takes a few steps to the side. Blood flows down her face.

The driver doesn't succeed in taking a horrible swing at Alexey either, because he gets a poisoned nail to the chest, launched by Kostik's crossbow. His ironpiece misses Alexey's head and snaps some sparkles out of rusty pipes. Delirious with pain, Alexey crawls away, trying to hide in the shadow of the wall, but the next blow to the head catches up with him, he squirms on the ground, twisting his face to the skies, and the limping one, with a grimace of pain on the face, bends over and drives the ironpiece into his bloody mouth, jacks it to the side and rips open the boy's neck so one can see the blackened stem of Alexey's throat.

Meanwhile Natasha turns sideways at Sonya, takes a few askew swings with her hook and runs towards Kostik, who hastily reloads his crossbow with two nails at once. Swollen because of cadaver ichor, the boy's fingers take a long time to fix the spring, but at the moment when running Natasha already sways the hook both nails in one savage strike punch through her nose and dig deep into the face, yanking back Natasha's head and splashing upwards a dark bloody medusa. In its inertial movement the crumbling blow of the hook crushes Kostik's head, breaks his neck, the sharp tip of the hook rips part of his face away,

blood splashes everywhere and he collapses into the mud. Natasha loses the balance, falls down to her knees and emits either a wheeze or a chirp. Blood pours in between nails stuck in her face. For a while she stands on her knees, leans on the hook and looks at the main workshop building, recognizing in it the home of her death, then Ljuba rushes up and hits her to the ear two times with a wrench and Nathsa cumbersomely drops off the knees.

At first the last standing vampire limps towards Sonya in uncertainty, but after seeing the pack leader die, turns back to the van. The staggering frame of the limping driver barely manages to reach the middle of the pathway between the warehouse buildings, when, thanks to the poisoned nail stuck in his chest, he begins to gag, falls to the side and sees Sonya who walks through the starry snow towards him with an ax in her hand. Only illuminated by the stars, her silhouette blurs out, merging together with the wet darkness. The limping one musters his last strength and crawls towards the car, grabbing at the soil and bunches of weeds that grow on the body of the planet so inhospitable towards him. Sonya reaches him next to the gap in the concrete fence and hacks for a long time till she manages to knock off the bucket. After that she smashes the head of the limping knight.

Totally exhausted, Sonya sits down into the mud next to the body of the foe. She shakes and a burning pain tears at her palm which she used to launch the flame, as if fresh boiling water is pouring on it from the kettle. Her legs, arms and dress are smeared in thick dark blood of fallen vampires. She shuts her eyes and her face becomes completely white just as a doll face. A new day is breaking.

When the cold sky gets illuminated by the pale pink color of sunrise, Sonya slowly drags the body of the limping one over to the trench, her legs firmly set in mud, and covers him with sand. She looks in sadness at the van she can do nothing with, and goes to the main workshop. The bodies of the boy and Natasha still lie around the square. The wind ruffles Natasha's hair, stretching them over her bent arm with its palm dipping in a puddle of blood that ran out of her head. Sonya takes the boy by his underarms and drags him into the workshop. There she finds both girls sitting next to the bodies of Kostik and Alexey. Ljuba takes handfuls of poison out of her hem and sprinkles it over the laceration on the face of Kostik. Kostik twitches and wheezes. Tanya cries in silence. Tears roll down her unwashed cheeks like first raindrops.

After dropping the boy into the railing's breach, Sonya pushes the dead, wrapped in plaid, woman down to follow him. She hears how the body hits the concrete floor.

- Doesn't matter how much I sprinkle, he won't move, - speaks Tanya in a fading voice while loosing tears and looking dully at Alexey. - It's all because of you. Damn swine. Filth.

Sonya takes off her dress and stockings, leaving only panties, and for a long time stares at the disfigured face of Alexey who furiously fought for her.

- He's finished, - says she. - But he fought like a true hero. Time will come when the dead children will rise up from the earth and he will be one of the first ones. Don't cry about him, Tanya. He conquered his future. Death took him to the pioneers. She has the right for that.
- What pioneers? - asks Tanya, looking into the face of Alexey and trying to find familiar

features in it. Her tears drop into the torn up mouth of the boy.

- True pioneers don’t die, - Sonya comes over to Tanya, squats down, hugs and kisses her on the cheek. - They carry guard in the stone forest, waiting for the bright future. He already stands there, your Aljosha, with a new red tie and he salutes.
- Really? - Tanya doesn’t believe it, she dries up her tears with the backside of her palm.
- Honest truth, - Sonya kisses Tanya again and holds her cheek in cheek, peering behind her. - When I find the stone forest I’ll see him.
- Then I’m coming with you, - says Tanya. - I want to get to the stone forest too.
- But you aren’t a pioneer. Only a true pioneer can enter the stone forest.
- And you?
- I’m a pioneer. I sure got accepted into the pioneers. It’s just that I have no tie, I’ve lost it.
- So how can I become a pioneer now?
- Nowadays it’s hard, there aren’t any true communists or Komsomol people left. Nobody can accept you into the pioneers now except for death.
- Then kill me, I know you probably can.
- Come on, Tanechka, it must be a heroic death. Makes no sense for me to kill you.

Only a painful wheezing of wounded Kostik is to be heard in the silence.

- Then I’ll just come with you. - quietly says Tanya. - I’ll sit down next to the forest and just continue sitting, it’ll be enough for me.

- Alright, - answers Sonya after giving it a thought. - If you want it like that, let’s go. But it may be a long way and a scary one.
- I’m not scared of anything, - says Tanya in an absent voice.
- Then tell me about the underground. There has to be something for the dead to rise.
- Why they rise, I don’t know. But there’s probably something in the darkness except for us.
- I saw it, - suddenly tells Ljuba. - When we went with Kostik to poison the nails we saw something moving in the dark at the floor level, like a dog.
- What did it look like? - asks Sonya.
- It was very dark there.
- Do you remember where?
- Next to the straight corridor that goes to the bedroom.
- Goes where?
- We call the place where we put the dead ones a bedroom, - explains Tanya. - Most of the poison is there. A straight corridor with round walls goes from there to the underground. I remember when together with Aljosha we dragged Ljuba, it seemed to me something was moving behind us, I turned around a few times but couldn’t see anything.
- Also Kostik said, - Ljuba steps in again, - something lives in the underground, but it walks on the ceiling and not on the floor, he shot at it once, but nails are useless against it.
- I thought so. You’ve got a pathway to the depth here, to the ugly places, - contemplates Sonya. - I have to look for it then. They definitely know the way to the stone forest. We need lots of fire

though, underground people are only afraid of fire. Tanya, let’s go get some black water.

They bury Alexey next to the wall of the warehouse. Tanya doesn’t cry anymore. She puts the nut on the chain in one of his hands and a handful of poison in another one. All four stand at the grave in silence, Kostik is healed up by poison and holds his hand on the neck.

They drag Natasha’s body over to the trench. Natasha is very heavy and leaves a mud trail behind her. After covering her with earth, Sonya and Tanya go for the water to the lake that is close by. It is already a full morning, the bleak sun disappears into damp clouds. Clouds crawl over from the west, there is the complete gray front of them on the horizon.

- Rain is coming, - says Tanya, actually rain doesn't matter to her at all. Sonya keeps silent.

Wind blows barely noticeable ripples on the oily surface of the water. A wide strip of brown soil surrounds the lakes, grass grows on top of it. One can see the tower made out of large blackened bricks standing across the water surface. Sewage pipes, wrapped in silverish insulation, lead from the factory to the lakes, still in the lifetime of the factory chemical waste has been poured into ordinary meadow lakes till all the life around them has ceased, grassland has died, reeds have stopped to grow and birds have stopped their nesting. When finally time, conquered by humans, halted its flow in this area of space, workers of an unknown department raised the black tower in the middle of the field, a silent bastion on the verge of eternity.

Residents of surrounding city districts preferred to avoid the cursed place. People told stories about ugly infants who make their dances around the tower, their

lives have only lasted within the walls of a maternity hospital next by, and about some boy who walked the fields at one frosty winter night and saw a bird with long goat horns, sitting on the top of the tower and plucking the stones out of it.

There were also stories about somebody living in the black lakes and crying like a baby in the fields at night, which actually was almost completely true, because there was a girl named Lisa living in one of the lakes, some unknown man raped her in the archway, strangled, cut out her belly button, drove to the lake and dropped her in it with a rusty truck wheel on her neck. Lisa took to liking living in a pitch black waters, more so she did not feel the need to breathe, when the weather got cold, she slid into the nest in the burrow she dug underwater and, when the times were warm, she fed on grasshoppers and sleeping birds she caught at night in the fields and, when she was full, she did not cry but rather sang on the shore of her lake, particularly on full moon, and this delicate girl’s singing about the beauty of dark spaces submerged into the abyss and filled with coolness, smell of flowers and stars, ignorant people took for singing of a homeless soul. Especially romantic Lisa found the absence of her belly button, therefore she was assured in the eternity of her being before and after death.

Coming by to get some water, Sonya feels the existence of Lisa right away, she notices some barely visible week-old traces on the soil and a specific smell. She lies down on the stomach facing the water and looks into the depth of the lake while quietly hissing. Tanya squints at her in fear and scoops the flammable water with a tin. Very soon a brightening spot appears in the dark water layer below her, and

Lisa silently emerges on the surface, letting some dark water pour out of her chest through the mouth. It is noticeable that in her lifetime, before the deadly pale touched her face, she could not count on her today's beauty.

- Forgive me, - Sonya begins in a humble way while sitting on her knees, - that I disturbed your sleep. But you know how pleasant it may be to talk to a person who can understand and comfort us. Aren’t you, Lisa, by any chance from Komsomol?

For a second the whitish eyes of Lisa express angst. Just as she wants to swim away back to her burrow, a flashback of pain, almost erased from the memory, possibly planted still in her future, calls her for a bitter smile.

- Not anymore, girl, I quit being in Komsomol when Komsomol quit to exist, - answers she in an unexpectedly melodic voice.
- It’s such a pity, otherwise you could’ve helped this poor girl, - Sonya points with her eyes at Tanya, who holds the bucket tight to the chest with her stiff arm and squints at the mermaid in scare and spite, - who wants to become a pioneer. Believe me she’s a good girl and if she’d go to school she’d be an activist with only excellent marks.
- Ah it’s all in the past, sweet girl, - Lisa waves her elegant ballet hand under the water. - All of it is dead.
- Oh, why do you say such things… What is your name?
- Lisa.
- Such a beautiful name you have. Well, now think about it yourself, Lisa, how can something huge,

- Sonya takes her hands apart as if wanting to picture the sun, - something so huge and full of life all of a sudden die in a moment, disappear without any trace? Me and you, Lisa, are small compared to Komsomol and even us, we can't disappear, we still do exist, dear Lisa. A thing that so many people believed in can't die, doesn't matter if they still believe in it as before or not. Leave a scarecrow on the field and it comes to life. And Komsomol, Lisa, is not a scarecrow but something many times bigger. Did you read "The Young Guard"[4]?
- Yes I did, - answers Lisa, she is now engulfed in unintended memories about the days of her past life, about cherry blossoms in May in front of the school, about stuffy reading hall of the library with the mysterious silence frozen in it, filled only with a buzzing fly, about the grandmother's clock ticking on the shelf, about the drowsy flight of the moth from the dresser into the corridor and about the cool wind that meets her bicycle on the shadowy slope.
- Well then how can it all die, dear Lisa? In this world where nothing happens without a reason. That means it lives, exists, one merely has to find it.
- You're probably right, girl, - Lisa agrees. - But I don't want to return to the beautiful past even if it will become the future. I like twilights and the graveyard-like chill of the present, its dimming street lights, decaying leaves and irredeemable sadness of night. I like solitude.

[4] Historical novel of Alexander Fadeyev about a resistance organization during World War 2 on German occupied territories, it consisted of young adults. Classics of children's literature in the Soviet Union.

- And I’m drawn to the bright mystery of scarlet stars, - sighs Sonya. - I want to become a sorceress.
- You’ll probably die, brave girl, - says enchanted Lisa. - I like your fate.

Then there comes silence. Everybody thinks about their own things and Tanya thinks about fate, while holding on to the bucket.

- Now I think it’s time for me to swim off, - says Lisa. - It’s getting too cold, my shoulders freeze above the water.
- Lisa, have you maybe noticed something unusual here around your lakes? - asks Sonya and her face becomes serious. - Does something wonder you?
- Just that light above the grove, - answers Lisa after thinking for a bit. - I don’t know where it comes from. On cloudy nights, if one gets to the top of the hill, over there to the north where the forest begins one can see the white shining so faint that the living ones, unable to see in the dark, can’t notice it. But I can see it. I think something is glowing in the forest.
- Thank you, Lisa. It appears to be the thing I’m looking for. A light above the grove.
- Aren’t you afraid to live here? - Tanya asks the mermaid. - What if somebody tosses fire into the water?
- Fire can’t live there, underwater, girl, nothing can live there, only I can. At the bottom there are very many traces of the ones who came before me, but all of them are dead. Farewell, - Lisa turns around and in strong swings of legs and arms goes away into blackness. Tanya stares after her, while Sonya cleans her arms and legs in the lake, scrupulously washing off the blood stains.

On their way back she takes one look to the north.

- Is it true that the forest begins there? - she asks Tanya.
- Yes. Really close by, just that it’s in the lowland so one can’t see it from here. We often catch mice there. But I never noticed any shining.
- In any case we have to wait for the night if we want to see it.
- Sonya… - asks Tanya after long silence - why is there fire coming out of your hand?
- I sucked out the cat’s heart, - answers Sonya. - But it’s all spent now.
- Can I also do that?
- I don’t think so. You’re different.

Rain starts to fall as they near the factory.

And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire…

Revelation 15.2

…I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you.

Revelation 3.9

First spooky talisman

- From here on I'll go alone. Go away.

Sonya stands inside the wall of a small underground tank, bounded by a low ceiling, in it there is a gaping hole with its edges washed out by the tons of sewage waters, Sonya holds in her hand a tin bucket with burning oil water. She wears pants, a checkered shirt and a jacket Tanya presented her from the marauder supplies of the little factory dwellers.

- Right there, behind the hole, the pipe goes down, then straight and then it splits, - quietly tells Tanya. - Many rats come from there.
- Farewell, Tanya. If I don't come back by the evening - it means I stayed there forever, - says Sonya with no pretentiousness at all and dives into the eternal gloom.

Tanya stands and watches the glare of the burning bucket melting into the underground. Then she walks to the opposite wall, sits down on the floor, leans on the wall with her back and begins to wait, looking with her sleepless eyes at the hole Sonya went into. She thinks about the stone forest, drifting clouds reflected on its mirror trunks. She thinks about Alexey carrying out his pioneer watch among the unthawing snow. Huge and indestructible as a mountain,

love fills up her little one-armed essence. Love towards someone she never knew in her lifetime, someone who killed her and made her live against her will so crippled and full of hate, love without a reason and without an end, like space that washes fiery shores of a burning star.

For a long time Sonya wanders through the pipes, sinking further and further into the abyss of the earth. She finds narrow pathways she cannot climb through, hatches on the ceilings of those pipes, overgrown by rust, and browned skeletons of workers in putrefied uniforms, victims of an old maintenance disaster, when in its rustling wail the alkaline river bursted through the collapsed drainage, mercilessly depriving of the air its creators, who desperately tried to grab at iron braces on the walls of the pipe. Here, in the depth of the spaces again lost to humans, everything went back on track, there is no more day and night cycle and the time is only to be measured by the generations of rats whose remains get mixed with sand and accumulate atop of each other in dried out metallic pipebeds.

Sonya orientates herself by the smell, horrible smell of the world no humans went into, although this world has existed long before them and will continue to exist after the last human dies. The smell is dissipated over the whole drainage system and for a few times Sonya goes back to the same locations, putting marks on the brown walls with a piece of a yellow brick. Finally she finds the hatch in the wall of the pipe, narrow stairs lead through it into a small chamber. At the bottom of the chamber there is a well with braces serving as stairs. Sonya puts the bucket down on the floor of the chamber, gets on her

knees and takes a few breaths out of the well. The smell comes from down there.

Sonya places the bucket on her forearm and carefully descends down the stairs, peering into the darkness below her and grabbing at rusty braces with her hands. Suddenly she catches the reflection of her fire in a slowly flowing underground river. The well ends over an iron bridge that hangs over the water by the props. The river is not a man-made creation, its banks consist of an ordinary brown clay with some landslide traces. A few meters up the stream Sonya sees the shallows formed by the clay that got washed out from the walls. Sonya lowers her leg and learns that it is barely knee-deep here, she takes a step down from the bridge and walks on the sludgy riverbed against the weak stream of water. While almost reaching the shallows she detects them.

They stand horizontally on the wall behind the shallows, as if lying down on the air. Two of them. No taller than Sonya. Their faces, the color of white mold, are marbled in skin growths that inflict weird terror. Their heads are covered in black spikes instead of hair. Their narrow black eyes have no pupils and reflect no fire, like matte plastic. They look more like stuffed dolls than living creatures. A sudden headache marks for Sonya the beginning of the telepathic contact with the underground people that cannot talk.

The underground people express their contempt at Sonya’s stupidity that led her this way because of the impossibility of her existence down here due to a long line of entities of her species that have already been interrupted here before. Death for Sonya is inevitable, she doesn’t understand this fact, and

therefore deserves contempt. Death for Sonya is inevitable.

Way to the stone forest, answers them Sonya silently. Way to the stone forest.

The incomprehension of the reason for Sonya's movement towards the stone forest collides with the part of her inner entity inaccessible to the mind vision of the underground people. The nonhumans subject Sonya to a sudden telepathic attack that brings her down to the sand in disorientation, she shuts her eyes and tries to remember where she is. Some burning water flows out from the tilted bucket into the river and quickly extinguishes. Sonya manages to remember herself again and sees that the nonhumans are closing in on her, she really wants to splash some burning water on them but doesn't do it. They immediately try to kill Sonya by tearing her brain apart but they cannot. Then they understand that Sonya is not a human.

Who are you. You are neither like the living ones nor like the ones who walk after death. Tell us who you are.

Way to the stone forest, answers Sonya. Do you know about it.

We know about it. Tell us who you are.

Sonya covers her eyes with her hand and shows to the nonhumans her essence.

Their horrible faces twist in fear.

What are you afraid of, asks Sonya, while a black knot slowly unwinds inside her.

The nonhumans desperately try to kill Sonya. Their tongless mouths open in sharp shrieks. Icy diamond screws pierce Sonya's head, blood flows out of her mouth, but she already begins to speak out things unfamiliar to herself. The underground people drop

down on the shallows and crawl towards their burrow. Their icy screws crack apart and crumble into the snow dust.

Let us go, mistress.

Stone forest, Sonya repeats the question. Stone forest.

In a moment a field with rotting haystacks appears in front of her eyes, a lonely tree at the stover's border and an abandoned tractor at the tree. Let us go, mistress.

Sonya spits out blood and the tremor of dying nonhumans tears apart the skin on the palm of the right hand she covers her eyes with. Then comes the silence.

Forcing herself to move her jelly legs, Sonya walks back and doesn't look at the spot where she left the corpses of the underground creatures. She knows what is happening to them now but doesn't want to see it. It is very hard for her to climb up the wall of the well, for a few times she stops to take rest, pressing her chest to the brackets with her eyes closed.

Sonya appears from the hole in the wall already by the evening, opposite of sitting Tanya. Her face is stiffened by exhaustion and the water is barely burning on the bottom of the bucket. They hug, squeezing each other, and the bucket drops from Sonya's unclenched fingers with a knocking sound.

She slides to the metal floor next to the fire with some rats caught by Ljuba merrily roasting on it, Sonya dives into sleep full of intertwining tree branches, orbs of stars made out of pale flowers float in between them, covered in icy fluff of the inextinguishable flame.

Late in the evening Sonya and Tanya make their way. Drizzling rain stings at their faces in the dark.

Succumbing hounds, some of hunger, some of cold, howl on invisible farms. In a distance, through the gloom even the stars cannot pierce, Sonya distinctly sees the glow Lisa told her about, similar to the light of a thin crescent that fell into a deep forest gully. The travelers go around Lisa's lake and up the gentle hillside, from there one can see a strip of the forest on the other side of the field. Sonya fixes her stare into darkness and nobody knows what she sees there.

Finally she begins to walk down the hill, little stones bite at her naked feet. Sonya left to Ljuba her shoes, only suited to walk on the solid ground, and instead got herself a straight razor Ljuba found back in the days on a junkyard, now it sits in the pocket of Sonya’s jacket, carefully wrapped in cloth. Sonya likes the razor very much, she always dreamed of having one with its comfortable plastic handle and the sharp blade, slightly tainted in rust that looks like dried blood. Such razor slices well, leaving with its cool blade thin stripes of sharp pain. Yes, Sonya prefers to kill swiftly and brutally. One should not forget that her mentors, life and death, are also rough like merchants that deal children’s liver.

Squinting at the nasty rain, the girls dive into the forest, in every human that passes through, it erases any memories of cardinal directions and locations of the cities. Their faces dive into the sea of damp, absorbing the smell of rotting weeds, wet tree barks and moldering cores of fallen trunks. Like tiny fairies they glide in darkness on the narrow pathway that spins between the trees, alone and detached from the whole world, the world they expect no help, no mercy and no love from.

A pale glow blooms ahead like a shard of a distant dawn, in her advancement towards the talisman Sonya

feels tremble and awe mixed with cold shake of fear. She doesn't even try to imagine what it is like and what would she do with it when she finds it, she simply decides to have a look at it and perhaps disappear forever. To touch this pure light with the watery surface of her eyes, to feel the translucent flame of freedom gently licking your heart. Ah, noone can know how magnificent is the future, that will probably never come… Also Sonya thinks about the guardian. About the huge horseman on his black horse. About the red star that burns on his budenovka[5]. About the merciless glare of his eternal eyes. About the fire saber that splits in half worlds of night.

Sonya stops Tanya with a touch of her hand. She sees a small clearing ahead with a tree growing in the middle. A phantom lantern glows in its crown.

Sonya carefully inhales the autumn air and listens closely to the rain's rustle. A faint smell of carrion creeps in from somewhere. Probably a forest mouse has died in its burrow. Or maybe he is here already? Sonya keeps still. Raindrops flow down her face like drops of cold sweat. Sonya snuggles the tree trunk, merges with it and turns into the forest dweller, she feels the movement of worms deep in the soil, the breath of a squirrel curled up in the hollow, strikes of raindrops on the branches, the hissing rot of soggy fallen leaves. And nothing else. But something bothers her still. She pushes with her palm on Tanya's shoulder and she kneels down into the grass. Then Sonya slowly sneaks towards the tree picking every step. Halfway she stops again because the smell suddenly gets harsher. Too much for a mouse. With her

[5] Distinctive hat out of cloth with a spike on its top and a red star on its front. Integral part of the red guard uniform during the Civil War.

eyes Sonya scrupulously scans the bushes the smell flows out from. Finally she notices.

- Halt, - quietly pronounces a husky voice, and when Sonya takes her foot a step back, - Hands up. Or I shoot.

Two shadows stand up from the bushes. Now Sonya clearly hears their heavy breath. Means they did not breathe before. She obediently raises her hands.

- Forwards, - orders the same voice.

Sonya moves forward, out to the clearing. She hears as one of them follows her. His steps are almost noiseless. Suddenly there is a rustling sound coming from behind her back, the place where Tanya stayed. A shot tears apart the mouth of silence. A second one hits her in the eyes. A third and fourth fill her with the salty blood oozing from the gums. The second enemy still stands there among the bushes and swears. A muzzle of a sawed-off shotgun pins Sonya in the back.

- Who came with you? - asks the husky voice.
- A friend.
- What are you doing in the forest?
- We got lost. Just wanted to take a shortcut. - lies Sonya.
- Take off the jacket.

Sonya takes off the jacket.

- Turn around.

Sonya turns around. In front of her there stands a stocky man, with an overgrown beard and tangled hair, with a sawed-off shotgun in his hands. He wears a worn out soldier’s padded jacket and an army’s ushanka[6] with a star. Judging by the smell, things are bad. The second man, dressed in a brown cape, gets out from the bushes. A pistol is in his hand.

[6] “Ear-hat”. Typical eastern european/scandinavian hat with earflaps to protect from the cold.

- Vermin got away, - he says. His voice is not as husky, his puffy face covered in stubble and he is a bit taller than the first one. - Oh, and just look at this baby. Owl, let's do her right here next to the oak, no trial. To the back of the head.
- Shut up. Over there is a stump, go shoot it if you want it so bad. This scum has to get a trial.
- Owl, but a trial for what? She’s underage. Can’t be held responsible for anything. Pop her to the back of the head and that’s it. Merely in a splash of her brain.
- Underage? At her age I already worked at the factory, - wheezes the old one in anger. - And she sold herself to the enemy.
- Then what, bring her to the lair?
- Bring her to the place we agreed on and then we’ll see.

The tall one spits down into the grass in irritation.

- Well then let’s go, goddammit. Before the second one brings over the polizeis[7].

The bearded one painfully twists Sonya’s hands behind her back and ties them up with a belt. They set forward. The tall one walks in front, captured Sonya is behind him, then the bearded one, from time to time he pushes Sonya with the barrel of his sawed-off shotgun. Rain drops from above without an end and Sonya cries, only with her tears flowing, out of the tiresome helplessness against her fate.

Time ended for them on a sunny summer morning half a century ago. There were eleven of them, partisans already for two months, but only accounted for two polizeis they killed in the forest and a soldier of german punitive forces that died in a shootout. They

[7] Derogatory term for German punitive forces during World War 2 which consisted of local collaborationists.

got surrounded near the creek in the forest where they set up a camp, there were many germans and almost no ammo. Eight of them died on the battlefield, three wounded were taken prisoners. They were hanged on the outskirts of an unfamiliar village with signs on their chests, the killed ones were placed at their feet in a row, and together they were left to rot for two hot summer days, until the sanitary inspection considered the further intimidation of a rural population as impractical. Then they were dumped into a cart and buried in a ditch that locals dug out in the forest next to the swamp.

New authority executed the operation in its inherent meticulousness with one exception: the place picked for burial was a lousy one. Since olden times the area had become notorious for evil swamp creatures inhabiting it and for children getting lost. Seven months have passed by and in a snowy february night eleven partisans got out from the grave and through the floating snow again they saw the black skies above their heads. There were no Germans around, they left back in the autumn, but the dead partisans could not believe it and estimated that the enemy had established solid authority and sent soldiers further to the east. For propaganda purposes they even allowed the local civilians to put out red banners but all the factories have been working for Germany now, children learned german language and nobody even thought of resistance. Only eleven partisans heroically continued their war with the hated occupants.

They found weapons on abandoned battlefields. They attacked truck depots and stole fuel which then was used to make explosives. They wandered through the forests and nobody could stop their endless bloody raid. A few times they got surrounded but got away due

to their ability to transform into animals and because bullets could not harm them. They knew no mercy towards the traitors and prosecuted them in their partisan tribunals that have only changed from time to time methods of execution. Mostly they hanged people but also drowned, strangled, quartered, chopped off heads, broke spines, peeled off the skin, tore bodies apart using trees, boiled or roasted alive and in exceptional cases came up with some even worse things. Rarely they shot people, sparing the ammo, but lately things got easier in this regard. Usually they also tortured prisoners for the purpose of finding out locations of the enemy presence, timeframes of future punitive operations, political stance of world's fascism and names of active collaborators with the new world order. In addition to the extermination of the population that has sold itself out to the invaders, the partisans damaged and broke everything on their way that in their opinion had any value whatsoever for the enemy, thriving in unreachable Germany. They blew up railways and derailed trains. They sabotaged power plants and destroyed gas pipelines. They captured and wrecked long-distance transport and there were even two plane crashes due to their fault. In their long course they only lost two fighters. The first one, nicknamed "Pike", died thirty years ago in a heavy combat with undercover forces of the fascist's internal affairs when a hand grenade exploded at his feet. The second one, the former squad leader by the name of Ignat, everybody called him "Desman", disappeared around ten years ago in raging flames of a heating plant he set on fire and his comrades still considered him merely missing in action. Now Mitya, usually called "Bear", commands the squad, unlike his

comrades, common werewolves, in particular rage he could turn into that large and dangerous beast.

The one walking in front of Sonya was very young and just turned nineteen in that far away summer morning of the last fight. In the squad he was called “Shaggy” and his real name was Leonid. He did not like getting fussy and preferred to kill the enemy indiscriminately and en masse, he did not appreciate torture, considering it a waste of time, besides, screams of pain made him nauseous and drowsy. Acting on his own he killed fascists promptly, making no reports to the commander, and got severe reprimand on multiple occasions as a result, but there was no way to punish him because every fighter was on a count. The second one was called “Owl” because he never slept and liked to eat grilled mice. Except for that Owl liked to strangle fascist children, especially boys, although he did not particularly disdain girls either. Once together with Shaggy they captured first graders walking in the forest and on the spot he choked six children right there on the meadow, while Shaggy tore off clothes, just like wet paper, from two young fascist teachers they hanged, in order to show the schoolchildren a complete infamy of their low betrayal and to explain them who is the real enemy here. With exception of one beautiful fascist girl Shaggy brutally raped and murdered in the bushes, all the other children were set free in hope that at least one of them will grow up to become a new partisan.

Sonya walks between the partisans already for about half an hour with her feet pricked to blood at the bushes, invisible in the dark. Most awful to her appears the fact that she did not manage to have a look at the spooky talisman and that there is barely any hope left to see it in the future. At some point

she turned her head and tried to talk to Owl who seemed to be more reasonable than his grimy companion but got a swift strike with the barrel to her back, stumbled and fell down, then Owl lifted her, grabbing by the hair.

- I’m gonna kill you, scum, - he reminded Sonya in a grimy manner, baring his yellowish wolf canines.

She did not try to talk anymore and just walked forward in silence. Sonya has no doubt they want to torment her a bit with their partisan trial and execute her afterwards, she is merely afraid that they may pick an unfortunate way of execution. Shooting, granted not in the head, and even more so hanging impose no fear on Sonya. But the frowning faces of the partisans, covered in hair, express such a draw to inventiveness and innovation that she feels unease.

Soon there comes a lazy sound of the river behind the murk of rain. On its bank, overgrown with sedge and willows, there is a wet forester’s hut with no light in it. Two more partisans sit at the doorsteps of the hut and eat dried fish, cutting it up with hunting knives. At the comrades' appearances they look dully at them without interrupting the eating. The one sitting to the left side of Sonya is called Pavel or simply “Sack”, he is fat and hideous, his swollen belly grunts and rumbles all the time in a disgusting manner. There is an AK placed on its butt leaning against his knee, his boots are utterly torn up and captured stems of grass are sticking out of them. He wears an obviously undersized tracksuit with a jacket. He is known among the partisans for his lust aimed exclusively at animals, he has no intention at all to get into intercourse with them due to his long decayed genitals, but rather plays with them for a long time

touching the beloved creature with his hands and kissing it with his plump mouth till he chokes it or breaks its neck. Animals suspect nothing about their fate and love Sack back and one can often see a squirrel, hedgehog or even a fox running after him on the pathway. The second partisan sitting to the right is called Volodya, nicknamed “Turnip”, probably for the odd shape of his head, which however doesn’t look like a turnip at all but rather resembles a hunk of rye bread with grains, forehead and chin sticking far out on his pockmarked mug covered in freckles and pimples. There is an AK on the back of Volodya as well, three grenades and a metal canteen on the belt. He is dressed in civilian clothes and only has army boots out of kirza[8].

- Heyall, - Shaggy spits out to the sitting ones, sits down at the doorsteps and tries a piece of dried fish. - Ugh, much too bitter.
- Oh don’t be like that, Shaggy, - objects Sack stretching out the vowels in a priestly manner. - A fine fishy it is. Where did you get the girl?
- Seized her close to the city. I said just shoot her, but Owl wants to make a trial.
- That’s proper, - Turnip joins in a sick voice. - No go without a trial. What if she’s innocent? - and he smiles, baring distant and blunt teeth all the idiots have.
- The scum is guilty, - wheezes Owl, he carefully takes Sonya by the hair and loses the belt on her hands. - Undress, fascist vermin, we’ll torture you with matches.
- We’ll stick wire in your ears, - rejoices Turnip. - You’ll tell everything, even start speaking german.

[8] Cheap artificial leather.

- Why would you torture me, - says Sonya. - I'll tell everything as it is. I know where the fascist warehouses with bacteriologic weapons are. And I can't speak German because I'm bad at school.
- With what weapon? - Sack wheeze-gurgles in confusion.
- The fascists invented a new weapon, - patiently explains Sonya. - bacteriological. People get all kinds of sicknesses because of it. Cholera, mumps and the like. The fascists pack this weapon into shells which then spread the disease.
- Oh mother of god, - waves off Sack, little vortex drives up in his belly for a while, then he burps.
- And how do you know about it, scum? - wheezes Owl in suspicion.
- We learn that in school to get accustomed to the fascist ways of war. And we ourselves are fascist children so we got all vaccinated against the horrible diseases back in our childhood. If you want I can bring you to the contagious warehouses with tubs swarming in bacterias.
- I don't believe her, - says Shaggy in a wince. - It's all lies.
- Yeah, some shady deal, - Owl agrees. - maybe even a trap.
- Definitely a trap, - rejoices Shaggy. - Clever, - he spits into earth in a sort of admiration for the fascist plan.
- Why, why you don't believe me, - Sonya starts crying, tears start to drop from her eyes, she rubs them with her fists and sobs.

Owl holds Sonya firmly at the elbows while Turnip takes off her clothes. After that they put her with

her back on the moist soil, Owl presses her down with his bodyweight and begins to burn her with matches. Fire bursts, illuminating the partisan’s beasty faces. Sonya jerks away and screams like crazy. Shaggy takes off his belt, swings it way back and snaps Sonya with the buckle aiming at her liver. It hurts very much and Sonya desperately howls, trying to protect herself with her legs. Then the partisans tie up Sonya with the belt of Shaggy again and take a break to gnaw on some fish. Raindrops fizz on the burn marks across her body. Her belly is dotted with bleeding bruises and whipped cuts left by the badge. Sonya’s face is ugly out of constant crying.

- Now you tell the truth, fascist scum? Tell the truth eh? - Owl leans over her. Speech breaks out of his gorge like steam from under the lid of a pot. He unleashes the belt and Sonya tries to cover up her face with her hands but he holds her tight by the wrists.

Sonya nods her head many times.

- I told you the truth, - she cries out, choking on tears. - I know nothing more.
- Let’s stick a wire in her ear. - suggests Turnip. - Or in the nose.
- Makes sense, - Owl presses Sonya down again. Sonya twitches her head but the partisan grabs her chin with an iron hand and sticks wire into her nose. - Answer me, scum, - he exudes a hacking hiss.
- Deeper, - shrieks Turnip. - Put it deeper!

Sonya screams her lungs out, the feeling of cold rain drizzling on her palate and blood flooding the throat. Owl takes out the wire and, like a dentist, gently turns Sonya’s head to the side to stick it into her ear. Blood flows out of Sonya’s nose.

At this moment Tanya steps out from the forest, clasping to her chest a little house with a hole instead of a door.

For Tanya it was a simple story after she got separated from Sonya. At the sight of the partisans she ran as fast as she could and only one Shaggy's shot out of four reached its target hitting her between the shoulders. Tanya dug into bushes, picked out the bullet with a sharp stick and went back to the site of attack. There were neither Sonya nor partisans anymore, only whispers of rain and matte glow of a half-rotted birdhouse up in the tree. Thrusting her metal hand like a claw into the tree trunk, Tanya climbed up and tore off the birdhouse with its rusty nails out of wet moldy bark. It was a very old birdhouse, its rooftop planks went askew and took the nails out of its walls. Despite curiosity and hunger Tanya did not dare to open the heavy carrion-smelling birdhouse with parts of an old nest sticking out of it and simply carried it in Sonya's tracks. Watching from the bushes over the agony of her friend, Tanya got scared that Sonya might die because of the wire in her ear and decided to get out. She believed that indeed there is a spooky talisman inside the birdhouse and, if set free, something terrible may happen that will help Sonya. Therefore, when Shaggy and Turnip took aim at her, Tanya simply smashed the birdhouse in a swing against the stump at her feet and it broke into pieces. But Tanya saw nothing on the stump except for planks, some junk and pieces of a shattered nest woven out of twigs, bird feathers and animal hair.

The partisans look in astonishment at the girl with a metal arm that smashed the birdhouse against the stump. One can hear sounds of Sonya's muted weeps and remote rumbling of Sack's stomach. Owl slowly gets up

from the tortured body of the girl, still holding a bloody piece of wire in his fingers. And then all of them begin to feel the horrible stench, stench like there would be decaying carcasses of elephants lying all around the forest.

Sonya lies on her back with her eyes facing the stars and because of that she notices Him first. He is about hundred meters tall and the star on his budenovka shines like the one on the Kremlin tower. His black horse stands knee-deep in night trees, long tongues of fire erupt from the mane along its neck. Sonya sees huge blue bare feet inside the stirrups and hundreds of human skulls decorating the harness. Sonya sees the saddle made out of skin of a murdered angel and the discolored tunic charred by lightning strikes. She sees Him lifting the fire saber - a burning poplar trunk.

- No! - screams Sonya, but the blow of dissecting blaze has already struck through the dark tree crowns on the wet river bank, sweeping everything on its way.

Trunks collapse, their tops fall off, engulfed in crispy flames by the unquenchable heat of the red army blade. The wave of fire sweeps away poor Tanya and drags her through the air like a moth that caught fire from the candle. She can’t even make a shout as she disappears without a trace, extinguished in a second like a shred of a burned out firework.

In a mad roar the partisans begin to run, tearing off the clothes on the way and turning themselves into wolves. Only Sack is not running, he is too fat to escape, instead he desperately blasts the already straightened horseman out of his AK. Scarlet bullet tracers hiss and stretch out into the black height. The guardian takes a broad swing somewhat from behind

his back and the next blow of the fire saber takes off on its way Sack’s head, that manages to spew out a last shriek, and sweeps a part of the roof off the hut, passes low above the river and touches its water with a swirl of fierce flame. The hut flares up like a matchbox, crackling leftovers of the roof crumble inside and a stripe of thick mist rises up from the river. The beheaded body of the fat partisan stands in a fiery background and, just like a freshly beheaded goose, throws a fountain of brown blood out of its neck towards the streams of rain, spreads AK’s last bullets over the skies with noone to find them anymore, and finally takes a heavy drop to the back only when the assault rifle viciously snaps its tooth on the emptiness.

The rest of the werewolves rush along the river bank while looking back, but the huge horseman catches up with them in a slow trot so they make a sudden turn and jump into the water. It is already hard to identify their half-beast personas in the spectral fire of the burning hut, they dive deep in a frenzy, trying to reach the other bank. The Guardian’s horse makes a non-horse snore, carefully steps into the water and the horseman takes one swing of the saber on the water in his full body force. The river boils up and evaporates in its slow flow, the gasping werewolves seek to dive deeper but don’t manage to reach the desired cool sludge of the river bottom and they die due to the boiling water gushing into their throats. When a steam cloud gets thinner one can see their bloated, cooked corpses being dragged by the stream up to the north.

During this reprisal Sonya crawls on her back towards the stump, pushing herself backwards on the wet soil with the legs and spitting out blood that flows into

her larynx. She can barely think straight because of the pain in her stomach and is only pushed forward by one wish: to see the spooky talisman before she dies. But when a black monolith of the horseman eclipses black skies above her, Sonya quits crawling and starts crying, quietly and in no hysteria, crying out of impotence and futility of her fate. Everything from the beginning on was in vain. She could have never prevailed over Him.

He looks from the height upon stretched Sonya. His dead face expresses no feelings. Through tears Sonya sees His blue-black hand that holds the reins, running over the tunic, covered in charred holes from all the lightning strikes. And then inside of her head Sonya hears His voice, wheezed and muffed, coming from everywhere at the same time, as if the earth itself would speak.

You came. I have been waiting for you for a long time.

Sonya’s heart freezes and blood stops flowing into her throat. Cold air sogged in water mist easily pierces into her chest.

There are fire sigils on your body as well. The prophecy has been fulfilled.

The fire saber vanishes into an infernal sheath. The eyes of the demon look into the eyes of Sonya and she feels infinite tranquility like in winter skies filled with stars.

Now it is your turn. Now you must keep it.

He begins to gradually dissolve in streams of rain. The mane of His horse extinguishes. In a few minutes he is no more as if he never existed at all. Sonya disappears into senseless darkness where dead birds sing in voices so non-bird like.

She comes back still at nighttime. The rain has put out the fire on the hut and it oozes in the darkness with some bitter smoke. There are burned trees next by, some trunks still smolder in a mysterious manner. Sonya cleans up her back from the soil stuck to it and gets dressed, wincing in pain the clothes inflict on her. She sees the spot where the spooky talisman got thrown out of the birdhouse and now it lies, slightly shining in the grass, like foxfire but she is not in a hurry. Something she never knew before appeared inside her. She thinks that maybe she was dead again. Truly dead, not like after that brick the workers threw in her head. Truly dead like in that far away summer in a pioneer camp when group leader Pjotr opened for her the gates of hell with a hit against a black coastal rock.

Ah, scary Pjotr, his dark wavy hair and hands with drawn-out musical fingers, his unsolved look askance, the wheezish voice, the slight smell of tobacco on his white shirt with short bright sleeves, his laughing tanned friends, leaders of other groups. Sonya and her friend Dasha drank with them dark-red Crimean wine, dragged on little chewed roll ups with foul weed, looked at pornographic pictures and gave themselves to pioneer leaders in the sticky darkness of the adult's dorm with its loud ticking clock that counted hours till the morning horn. Igor, leader of the group "Dawn",always carried drunk Dasha in his hands away into his room and Sonya stayed with the rest and let them do everything to herself, even things that were not in the pictures. Grown ups fell to frenzy during the act and tormented Sonya, unable to enjoy it in a humane way anymore, and Sonya thought that is exactly the way it always happens in their horrible world, so she endured obediently although she liked only Pjotr,

his kisses burned through Sonya like stars falling from the summer skies. She liked when Pjotr pinned her to the bed so she couldn’t move and for a long time fiercely slammed her with the whole body, ever so often kissing her forehead, sweaty from the night heat, and along with the pain Sonya felt the satanic force that lived in his underdeveloped body, she fainted and flew low above the heavenly grasslands, almost touching lightweight enflamed flowers with her face.

At the end of their term Pjotr secretly asked Sonya to take a farewell walk with him to the seashore. It was a transparent sunny morning outside, they walked barefoot on the sand, polished by the tides, and Sonya knew that Pjotr was going to tell her something very important, maybe even life changing. Pjotr leaned on the black cliff, corroded by water, and for a long time continued smoking, meanwhile Sonya has been picking some seashells nearby to bring them home to her mom. Finally Pjotr told Sonya to come closer. She came closer while brushing the windblown hair out of her face, the collected seashells left in a pile on the sand. He hugged her, squeezed against his chest, kissed her forehead and then grabbed tight by the hair and smashed in all his force with her head against the cliff. He smashed her one more time but Sonya couldn’t memorize that anymore, after the first blow she fell down into the grass that burned in eternal fire.

Sonya gets dressed and washes her teary face in the ice cold river. Then she gets back to the stump and picks up the spooky talisman out of the grass. Without ill will it burns in her hand, glaring with its ruby

metallic surface and a thin golden engraving. The Komsomol Badge of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya[9].

A warm shimmering light enters Sonya and cures the pain that still lives inside her. She touches the badge with her lips.

- You do love me, - pronounces Sonya tenderly, breathing into its golden profile. - You do love me, Lenin. And I am in Komsomol now.

Sonya pins the badge on the chest of her shirt and gets into the scorched hut, rain falls into it, unrestricted by the roof, she lies down on the bench, closes her eyes towards the rain and thinks about Zoya, a dark-haired girl from Moscow school number 217 that fascists hanged in the village Petrishevo, who on the way to her partisan mission hid her Komsomol badge in the birdhouse, nailed to the young sapling in the forest. Perhaps it wasn't her who put it there, but rather grimy partisans that mourned their joyful young friend. Perhaps this badge didn't belong to her at all and only appeared later in some kind of a museum, similar to relics of the saints scattered across the earth, because what sort of a Komsomol hero would she be without a badge. Perhaps even Zoya, brutally tortured and raped, wasn't hanged by inglorious fascists that spoke in their beast language and instead went missing on the frontline, as did countless thousands young members of Komsomol just like herself. Perhaps she even never existed in the world at all, only somewhere in the darkness of the time, born in unknown ways out of a human fantasy, but being no less beautiful, terrifying and holy because of that. It wasn't even herself so important, the virgin martyr that maybe never lived at all or died a

[9] Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, Hero of the Soviet Union, during World War 2 as a member of the partisan squad, aged 18, she took acts of sabotage in German occupied territories, was uncovered and captured. After refusal to collaborate - brutally tortured and hanged.

long time ago, but her flaming symbol, this ruby-golden badge, soaked in her blood, now condemned to burn forever regardless of truth that receded long ago into the past - the fact if she was real or not.

At dawn Sonya fell asleep and became completely invisible in the burned out house, in her sleep she walked the night fields, shining in golden dew, and whispered to one another with barefooted Zoya, a dark noose-mark was visible on her neck.

And they of the people and kindreds and tongues and nations shall see their dead bodies three days and an half, and shall not suffer their dead bodies to be put in graves…

And after three days and an half the Spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them.

Revelation 11.9, 11.11

Masha’s second face

She wakes up in the evening twilight. The rain has stopped but the sky is still sad and cloudy, its mouth clenches, facing the cold wind’s pressure. Quite far from the fateful stump Sonya finds a piece of iron that served Tanya as her arm, there is still a burned bit of wire attached to it with stuck bits of her flesh that resembles black processed cheese. Sonya smiles at the fact that now in the stone forest Tanya got her hand back to carry out the pioneer salute, from the river bank Sonya throws the piece of metal into close leaden water. After that she walks for a long time against the current but can’t find the bridge she needs to get to the other side and continue her path eastwards, to the tree in the field and the rusty tractor underneath it.

It is already getting dark when Sonya comes upon a boating station, surrounded by the wire fence with non-floatable boats stacked upon each other bottoms to the tops, there live feral dogs together with the former keeper of the boating station Grigory, fired long time ago due to shortage of money for the salary, he still continues his existence on the station grounds for the lack of any alternatives. First, the greedy owners even hired another keeper for half of

the pay and Grigory opposed the outsider by bashing on empty fuel canisters at night and howling like a big underwater bird. The outsider was very young and afraid of howls Grigory made but he wouldn’t leave and only bolted himself shut in the gatehouse, drank vodka and set off the dogs. It was not fear that drove him off but rather necessity, because there was no money to pay him anymore either. The boating station got locked up and Grigory began his quiet living in it, albeit with no payment, he caught fish in the river and begged for bread in the surrounding villages. His clothes almost perished, his body dried up, his eyes sank in, and Grigory acquired such an appearance that one of the hermit monks, that stumbled upon the foul place, took him for a new ascetic and lived with him together for a while in the gatehouse, paying attention to the guttural screams of Grigory and devotedly feeding the teacher with green pea pies. But when the cold weather arrived, the monk couldn’t bear the hardships of the station's existence anymore and vanished, leaving under the bench a dirty sock and a thin book with commandments of unknown saints.

By the day Sonya knocked on the gates of the station Grigory hadn't eaten already for a week and had no need for food anymore. He had no need for movement either and sat in his dark station den on the tattered armchair, waiting for death to come. Grigory considered death to be an ordinary continuation of life but in such a form, when a human being doesn't require food or water anymore, so he can simply get up and walk along windy autumn roads around the globe. Grigory already prepared a stick for this long walk, because legs may refuse to walk by themselves, and now he carefully listens to his surroundings, putting no trust into his weakened eyesight, in order to

recognize incoming death and finally quit tormenting himself with silly expectations.

When Grigory sees Sonya he understands right away that it’s a saint girl Praskovya Palchikova who came to visit him, she goes everywhere by foot and lets wicked people condemn herself, trying to shame them with her chastity. She was born out of the earth and her father is God, Grigory imagines him being a huge shy man with an unwashed beard, knobby feet and a bottomless stare of big clear eyes. Grigory knows that God drinks vodka and afterwards snacks on sauerkraut with bread and, out of his natural purity, he eats nothing more. And when people commit wicked deeds, God feels ashamed, sighs and diligently thinks with his big shaggy head how to straighten things out.

Grigory feels glad about Sonya’s visit and decides not to let her into the station, so he can feel ashamed of his hermit’s callousness. The girl is probably cold and hungry, her skin is so thin - blood vessels shine right through it. In a weak hope that a compassionate human will let her into warmth and give her some food, she knocks with her white frosted fist on the rusty gates. Grigory looks through the window at her, thrown out by the Father into a ruthless cold world, he’s very much ashamed, and Praskovya’s chastity is so touching, that it calls out of him a quiet mumbling prayer.

After getting no answer Sonya begins to walk away. Grigory hears how her little bare feet are brushing the soil. The Lord’s blissful shame fills Grigory and a quiet tear rolls down from his eye. In the same moment the gatehouse’s door goes open and Sonya enters the room, she cleans her feet at the doorstep. After closing the door she sits down on the bench in front of Grigory and folds her frozen hands on the knees.

The keeper crosses himself, wondering about the holy power that will not let him stay in minor shame.

- Uncle, do you by any chance have a boat? - asks Sonya while looking at her fingers.

Grigory doesn’t answer her, touchingly observing Sonya’s face instead and trying to look for signs of wicked disgrace on it. There is some soil stuck in Sonya’s blonde hair, a scratch on her nostril, a jacket smeared with rotten grass and sand. Because of such looks Grigory crosses himself again.

- I need to get to the other side, - says Sonya.

Grigory moans and crosses himself one more time, because on that side the girl will get tortured even more severely and then finally killed. Over there, on the hill in the forest stands an abandoned church, unreachable for heavy November fog, diabolic beasts rule over the barren fields from there. Wouldn’t it be for the river that flows from the holy underground well, fiends would come over and devour Grigory, taking no disdain for his dried old-man’s meat glued to the bones. Two villages up the stream on the other bank went completely filthy. Many times Grigory has seen fire burning next to the church, and heard some woeful satanic singing and once he has noticed a woman dressed in black, that washed a strangely quiet infant in cold water on the sand spit.

- Will you bring me to the other side? - Sonya raises her pure, filled with otherworldly sorrow, eyes at Grigory.

The boatman stands up and walks to the door while wiping his tears, transparent due to a long malnutrition. The naive self-sacrifice of God’s daughter takes away his strength. He understands that there is no place even for the pity in the execution of an act destined by God. Grigory slowly drags an old

boat into the water, prays and admits to the cat-eyed sky man that now it all got to him, and he will walk to far away monasteries in search of salvation and will not wait for his death before doing that.

Again and again raising fossilized oars, Grigory carries Sonya to her torment. She sits quietly, hands still folded on her knees and stares into water. Once she even smiles in a childish manner, thanks to that Grigory wants to turn back, but clenches his teeth and doesn't submit to weakness and continues his hard Judah's business, while listening to the breath of the girl, destined to a horrible agony.

When the boat's bow hits the sand Grigory freezes still, gazing into cold merciless space. Sonya gets out of the boat on the grass that is twisted by death.

- God help you, girl, - says Grigory while losing some heavy tears and crossing himself.
- Thank you, - answers Sonya and strokes the old man's shoulder with her hand.

Afraid his strength may leave him any moment, Grigory rows off into the rain. He clenches his jaws in sorrow, reaches the middle of the river, lets his oars loose and looks back. Sonya is not on the bank anymore and the spot where her feet stepped first looks empty and chilling. Then Grigory buries his face in his hands and begins to howl, he doesn't notice how much water is already inside of the old boat, it flows in through the breach under his seat and continues to rise.

Sonya walks down the pathway among massive black trees. There are no stars in the sky. Terrifying silence streams around Sonya, in a muted waterfall it breaks through the edge of the forest hidden behind the horizon. Sonya is starving and when she notices a small window light behind the tree branches, she

leaves the pathway in hope of finding some food next to the human housing. She tears through the brown-red bushes of rosehip and sees a stone church on the vista surrounded by crosses of orthodox graves, the light she noticed glows in its little window. The church smells like wet stones and fallen leaves. Sonya plants her feet against the stairs and uses both of her hands to push the heavy door, then she cautiously sneaks into the humid darkness. Right there, in the vast mausoleum darkness, alexandrite-colored light draws a fire circle, satanic blood of two god-forsaken villages flows through it: Small and Big Gorohovka.

It all began a few years ago when in Small Gorohovka, in the hut of old Pelageya, her lustful niece Milka passed away in a harsh childbirth, even in the rural lackness of men she managed to get herself a belly. Before her death Milka choked and puked, screaming in frenzy out of pain, but only blood was flowing out of her and a child never came out. After the harlot became quiet forever, Pelageya artfully sliced her bloated belly open, just as she sliced open pigs in the autumn times, and pulled out a freak so ugly and large that she immediately quit wondering about Milka’s death. The freak was alive and hairy but due to her deformities couldn’t even scream and only wheezed, oozed some blood and squirmed in the hands of the midwife. However Pelageya took pity on her, named her “Masha” and told Matrena to feed the child. Matrena was a local dummy who had been hiding at Pelageya’s from the psychiatric doctors, always milky due to her dumbness, she usually pumped it for Pelageya’s man, Trofim, for healing purposes. Under the kind looks of Pelageya, who blindly loved all the living beings, Masha has been biting in a wheeze on

the breasts of squeaking Matrena and growing slowly but steadily.

Soon in Big Gorohovka, which was indeed almost two times bigger than the Small one, there came rumors of a horrible freak that crawls on the ceiling of Pelageya's house and raises dead ones from their graves. In the backyards people said that cabbages wouldn't grow due to such devilry, that inside the village's church the cheeks of the healing icon of Virgin Mary blackened and that in the last two years three old women and two old men have died in Big Gorohovka - and none in the Small one. Both villages were entirely populated by the old people, all the young ones fled to the cities and locals took a forward trench in a defense line against the deadly sorrow. Once in the spring time old man Pankrat went from Big to Small Gorohovka and delivered a request to hand over the freak for it to live in the Big one and the Small one would be allowed to utilize it if needed. Instead, foul language rained over Pankrat and a sturdy wattle fence began to grow around the Small one.

However people of Big Gorohovka could not simply settle with that morbid horror ruling over their village and once in March at night time Pankrat got drunk on vodka and, screaming out wartime songs, drove the kolkhoz[10] combain through the wattle and the crowd of hags, parched by hunger and illnesses, armed with axes, knives and pitchforks, rushed through the breach. Yet, due to old-age insomnia, people of Small Gorohovka were always prepared for defense and in the dark night, in secret from the state authorities, the bloody battle commenced, illuminated by two huts that aggressors set on fire and accompanied by grumpy

[10] Collective farms created in the Soviet Union as a part of agricultural reforms.

old-age swearing. Pelageya fought with a fire poker, cursing on the way as she crushed heads of hostile hags and splashed their brains on the ground, having no mercy even at her cousin Tamara Lukichna, after the blow something started pouring out of her mouth like out of an overturned bucket. Pankrat in the harvester crushed enemy hags that were running around the yards with axes in their pajamas and overcoats, he wanted to crush Pelageya as well but Trofim unloaded a double-barrel hunting shotgun into him and the harvester with the dead driver ran into a barn, eliminating all six of Pelageya's chickens. In the absence of ammo Trofim skillfully acted with the butt of his shotgun but got an ax to his back and fell down, groaning and spitting blood at the doorsteps of his hut on top of the corpse of the freshly slaughtered hag, Kondratevna, he just finished with a shotgun butt to her teeth. Pelageya got nailed by the pitchfork to the wall of a crumbled barn, in agony, she has been slowly handing out her soul to Satan, when reinforcements arrived, led by the second old man from Small Gorohovka - Ivan Fedotovich, and Big Gorohovka retreated, leaving their inventory and mortally wounded to the enemy.

Twelve corpses, not to count chickens, stayed on the battlefield. But their sacrifice was not in vain, because after the death of greedy Pelageya people came to understanding, Masha was set up to live in a neutral church and it turned out she doesn't crawl on the ceiling and doesn't raise the dead after all, but instead, if one sucks on her index finger - the vitality of youth returns to the person. There were only two men left in the villages after the slaughter: Ivan Fedotovich from the Small one and Nil Gavrylovich from the Big one and then both of them found a harem

of ten hag-wifes, in a complete disdain towards the christian tradition. Devout hags crossed themselves but fell into sin and soon reached complete bestiality thanks to senility and relapsing into childhood of each and everyone of them. On warm summer days there were wormy knots of thin half naked hags having group intercourse on the barren soil or dancing around the well and singing obscene ditties, or even laughing and swaying their chicken legs on top of the wattle fence with brooms squeezed between their wrinkly thighs.

A year has gone by and the hags began to give birth to twisted wrinkly children as if they were already of old age, raising hope for revival of the desolated villages. By that time Masha became a pale girl with a hunch and a protruding lower lip, she lived in the church, defecated in its corners and her litter exuded some sort of a burning, strange kind of stench. Masha used her litter to continually ruin icons, she smeared the eyes of the saint faces and outlined their lips. On holidays in the church people read gospels backwards, spat on the cross, one after another climbed on top of the altar and urinated on the holy scripture. Masha guided the orgy, shouting out curses in a wheezy voice, in the end she always defecated and wiped herself with an open Bible, the sin of a group intercourse followed immediately after.

When Sonya appears on the doorsteps of the church, an evening prayer sounds from inside of it, Nil Gavrylovich drawls it, with his pants down to the knees he swaps all the words in the prayer with obscenities. A cat that Masha hanged above jerks, sways and spins around, dripping liquid cat shit all over the altar. Hags in mourning dresses and headscarves stand around, hold candles, cross themselves over their skinny butts and imitate with

their mouths the venting of intestinal gasses. They hear a squeak of door hinges and turn around to Sonya. Their bony faces appear completely identical to Sonya as if Masha created in Gorohovka her own human race.

Nil Gavrylovich quits blaspheming, points his hairy mug at the door, squints and makes a muffled growl at Sonya. At the sound of this growl the hags bare their teeth and begin to press towards Sonya while crossing themselves on five points with their hands that are free from candles. But Sonya looks not at them, but at Masha who stands behind the altar. The eyes of the little hunchback glare like black yolks, tangled dirty braids hang down her face. She keeps her teeth gripped, spreads her lips and emits a quiet whistle. Sonya feels as the talisman starts piercing her chest with cold pain as if trying to hide behind her thin skin. Out of pain Sonya opens her mouth and clenches her fists. Through the tears she watches a huge man with a goat head wearing a black fur coat appear from the darkened wall of the church. His eyes, exactly the same as Masha's, pin Sonya's feet to the floor.

- Father, - wheezes Masha, - let me kill her, father. Or do you love her more than me?

Sonya is unable to move or scream. She only feels the frosty look of the goat-headed and pain in her chest where the talisman went.

- Let me kill her, father.

The hags snap at Sonya, grab and drag her, like a puppet, to the inverted cross made out of two logs. They screech and curse, undress Sonya, scratching her with their sharp yellow nails, turn her upside-down and tie her feet to the cross. Nil Gavrylovich wheezes and calls for God in a shower of handpicked sickening curses. The hag Grigoryevna nails Sonya's hands to the crossbar. Sonya rolls her eyes and madly screams in

pain. The frenzied hags crawl out from all the corners, pinch the girl's body and stick their crooked fingers in her eyes and one of them, Ulyana Ignatyevna, pokes her belly with a shoe awl. Nil Gavrylovich approaches the scene in order to rape Sonya while she is still alive. But the hunchback grabs the hem of his shirt and he roars in confusion and anger pointing his hands through the air. Finally there are so many hags gathered around that they manage to lift the cross with the ropes, with Sonya nailed to it, and fasten it to the wall.

There are burn marks and bruises on Sonya’s body noticeable in the gleam of candles. The hunchback comes to her, stinking heavily of urine. Sonya winces in pain and looks into her upside-down face. The freak spreads her palm and presses it at Sonya’s belly.

- I’ll kill you and become more powerful. No need to share the power. Soon my power will be everywhere. Father gave you to me.

Masha extends her hand to the side and it suspends in space. Out of the darkness the awl finds its way into it. Masha clenches it in her fist and holds the cold stingy awl at Sonya’s chest against her heart.

- Go away, - says she and pushes forward with her whole body. The awl enters Sonya with a moist quiet crunch, she shudders and doesn’t close her glazed eyes anymore.

Masha takes out the awl and blood starts to flow out of the hole in Sonya’s chest, she turns around to the flock.

- We will take communion with her, - says she. - Just let the blood drain to the floor of the temple first.

A sclerotic howl answers her. On the background of bleeding Sonya with her eyes frozen wide in astonishment, commences the earth wedding.

***

Trackman Vasily makes his morning round walk. He already got very drunk due to the grievous necessity of everyday's hair of the dog, therefore his feet take uneven heavy steps and push forward the railway's gravel. Vasily hums illegibly some sort of a song, trying to water down the monotonous melancholy of his path cloaked in drizzling autumn rain. From time to time he hits the rail with an iron stick with a dull clanking sound and listens to it reverberating in boundless spaces of the surrounding fields. If not for that booze Vasily constantly poured into his gorge, his work routine would be similar to the path of a donkey that fell behind its caravan. Thanks to the booze Vasily stops caring about anything and forgets his caravan that has disappeared into the mirroring space.

Vasily moans, raises his eyes from the railway ties and sees a naked young woman, dirty and with a bloodstain on her face, she walks along the railways. Vasily doesn't give a damn who beat and raped the woman, he simply looks at her naked feet stepping over ties. He understands that now he will have to testify to some gray policemen as a witness but doesn't give a damn about that either. He stares at the naked feet of the woman until she gets really close. In her hand she holds a stick with two nails on its end. The woman passes by Vasily and he decides to wait a bit before

turning around to look at her naked butt. And then the stick with two nails swings at his head from behind.
Vasily falls on the embankment and slides down the crumbling gravel. The woman accelerates the slide by kicking, then in the bushes she takes off Vasily’s clothes and puts it on herself. She takes an almost empty bottle of wine out of the pocket of his orange jacket and finishes it. Afterwards she grabs Vasily’s iron stick and climbs back on the embankment. She fixes her gaze at the distance and wipes blood off her face with her wet hand. Then she smiles because she can finally remember her name. Her name is Natasha. Her new blood path begins with the corpse of Vasily.
At nine in the morning pensioner Nadezhda Filipovna, who makes her household in the flat of her married son Roman, opens the door to Natasha. Rain has already completely washed away the blood on Natasha’s face and she dropped the iron stick into the bushes. Natasha presents herself as a maintenance worker and politely asks in a boozed up voice for a glass of water to quench her thirst. Nadezhda Filipovna wrinkles at Natasha’s stench which she explains by the girl’s simplistic upbringing, but nevertheless leans out of the door and serves her some water in a cup, Natasha takes advantage of that and punches her hard with the fist to the face. The pensioner falls down and Natasha finishes her with kicks, clearly enjoying the power that is returning to her. She drags the corpse into the apartment, picks some clothes and shoes out of the garderobe of the murdered woman’s daughter-in-law, pours half a bottle of perfume on herself, washes her hands and head in the bathroom, inside of a cage she finds a spry parrot, she catches and eats it alive together with its feathers, then she puts on her dead lips a thick layer of lipstick she found in a drawer

by the mirror. Then she lines her eyes, powders the swollen holes at the side of her nose, pins the hair and paints her nails with a brush she dips into a little bottle with pink nail polish. When she leaves the flat the only difference between her and an ordinary pretty young woman is an ax for chopping bones she hid in the sleeve of her shearling coat.

Around half past ten at the entrance of a nine storage apartment building Natasha kills with a blow of an ax a pupil of the sixth grade Volodya, who skipped the lessons with his friend Igor. Igor tries to run but Natasha catches him on the staircase, grabs him by the collar and also hits with an ax on the head. The boy’s feet separate from the stairs and he hangs loose in Natasha’s hand. She smashes faces of both schoolboys against the wall of the staircase, holds them by the hair and smears their blood and brains in thick stripes over the plaster. While doing that she imagines Sonya and her little friends in place of the boys.

Half an hour later Natasha attacks the schoolgirl Lida that goes home after shortened lessons, merely due to her having the same hair color as Sonya, she drags her into the archway, strangles, bites through her throat and drinks warm child’s blood that flows out to the collar of Lida’s jacket, she holds the girl by the temples so that the girl’s shoes push against her knees. After that she puts Lida with her cheek on the parapet, curses and chops off her head so that Lida won’t rise and start walking again.

Around noon in the archway with a blow of an ax Natasha kills a middle aged woman to take her wallet with money. With that money in a hardware store she buys a real meat ax and throws the old one into the drainage.

After that, Natasha circles around the city like a wolf, cracking heads of middle school children with an ax and spreading their rosy blood on the walls of houses. She feels that policemen are already tightening their deadly noose around her. Sometimes she hears service dogs barking on the nearby street and wailing summons of the sirens. Around four they try to arrest her and she runs at the police car, clutching the ax in her hand. Two policemen scream out of their lungs at her and order her to stop. Pistol shots pierce through the clothes on her chest and drench in blood her white blouse under the unzipped shearling coat. Natasha yells and strikes one of the policemen with the ax, marking his shoulder. The second one continues to fire at her from behind. One bullet hits Natasha in the head. In spite of pain she kills the wounded enemy that fell down to the asphalt with a strong blow of the ax and picks up the pistol. The second policeman runs away to the car. Natasha wraps herself in the shot-through shearling coat, hides her finally acquired ranged weapon in the pocket and disappears into darkening dead streets. The circle of her bloody trajectory is closing and she returns to the chemical bastion in the fields. In the darkness she approaches the trench she got out from in a pale autumn dawn, stops next to the bus, tilted on uneven ground, throws back her head with the mouth wide open and drinks the cold rain.

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Precisely in that moment Sonya begins to see again with her wide open eyes. It’s the Komsomol badge that protected the girl’s heart from the awl’s deadly stab,

it got hardened on the fiery chest of the young partisan and became now a part of Sonya's soul. That cross she was nailed to already lies on the ground in the middle of the black church and satanic hags haste all around her, preparing to roast and eat Sonya. Hunchback Masha sits next to the altar and tries to light a pile of moist brushwood with her bare hands. Sonya squints in pain, tears her hands off the nails with a crack and stands up from the cross. The cannibals dash aside from her and gather around hunchback Masha, screeching like rats. Sonya lifts her head at the ceiling of the church and sees a dome of heaven painted on it with the sun burning in long tongues of fire in the middle of it. Sonya smiles, having discovered the thread of her eternity once again, and slowly raises in the air.

Ah, such freedom overwhelms the steadily beating heart of Sonya as soon as her feet leave the ground, gravitating towards painted clouds, and her sight slowly floats past the columns that support the dome only for the sake of believability… Such darkness streams in her blood full of stardust and the chill of endless spaces no sun is able to heat…

Sonya freezes at a height of three meters, looks down and faces the angry stare of the little hunchback. Like a flock of thin black birds hags whisper curses with their dry lips and stir all around the master. With both of her hands Sonya takes the fire wheel out of the painted skies and launches it at Masha's head. Burning hags shriek and disperse around the church illuminating with their flames long forgotten icons. Like a kikimora[11], the jolly echo repeats their heart-rending death cries. One after the other they fall down on the floor, turning into oblongated

[11] Creature of slavic mythology, a malicious female spirit that usually lives in the swamps or deep forests.

curling fires that remind Sonya of her last pioneer summer.

Masha alone remains unscathed after the blow of the fire wheel. Flames merely scorch her braids, she shields her face with the open palm and continues looking at Sonya. However her eyes have lost their rule over the resurrected body of Sonya with ruby metal shining in its chest. As soon as she grasps it, a lump of invisible weight flies at Sonya who dashes in the air to the side and feels its putrid wind pass by, it strikes the church's wall and fractures the surface of murals. The next blow hits slightly above Sonya's head and dissolves into darkness. Sonya barely manages to hide behind the next column and launches a second fire wheel at Masha from there. The hunchback doesn't even try to avoid the impact, her dress catches fire, splits apart with charred holes and unveils the skin, untouched by flames. Two bashes of a gigantic hammer shake the pillar Sonya levitates behind. Pieces of plaster fall from the dome and stick in her hair. Sonya notices a crack in the body of a column and flies behind another one, launching a third wheel on the way. She sees fire pouring over Masha like ethereal water, burning through the scrunchies that fix her braids. And on Masha's exposed hunch she sees her second face, a small and evil one. She sees little arms and legs sticking out from her back. She sees Masha's siamese brother that feeds on the diabolic life force of his sister and grows slowly like a tree.

The shockwave of the next blow touches Sonya's shoulder and throws her back, spinning her body in the air. She barely manages to dive to avoid crashing into the archway between the columns. Sonya wastes no more effort on fire and flies in a lowering arc towards the

altar with Masha standing next to it. The little hunchback guesses Sonya’s plan right away and keeps her face forward, frantically opening and closing her mouth like a toad. The church shakes from battering strikes hitting its walls, one of the pillars crashes to the floor, a chunk of wall follows it, leaving a cloud of dust behind and opening a huge broken window into the night that is rustling with rain.

Sonya attacks from above with her knees to Masha’s mouth, the strike blows her off the feet, Sonya pins her to the ground, bites on her chin and rips apart with her hands the small child’s face on her back. Blood splashes out from Masha’s hunch, she wheezes in agony and tries to pull off by the hair this death from above. But Sonya growls and keeps on tearing apart the little mouth, she breaks off the jaw and rips through the child’s throat.

When Masha finally stops convulsing, stretching out her covered in litter naked feet to the fire, Sonya lets off the bite and sits down next to her on the knees. She breathes heavily, blood is all over her hands.

- No need to share the power. - she speaks out loud, although no one can hear her anymore and winces out of pain in her gums.

Sonya finds a knife on the floor, with it she cuts open Masha’s throat, holds her head with both hands by the temples and tears it off from the neck that is oozing with blood. Then she chops off her right hand, shakes off its blood to the floor and roasts it on the knife’s blade over a fire. Sonya gnaws on ill-tasting charred meat, gets dressed and leaves the battlefield, dragging Masha’s head behind herself by the braids. Under the rainy twilight skies she sees the goat-headed one, he stands knee-deep in the dark river

water. His eyes are closed. Sonya tosses the head under his feet into aluminum water that floods the dead grinning face in a second. The head sinks, dragging down into depth its long spreading hair. Rain falls over ripples on the surface and they quickly fade away. Sonya turns around and walks among tilted burial crosses towards the forest.

And the fourth angel poured out his vial upon the sun;
and power was given unto him to scorch men with fire.

Revelation 16.8

Partisans

The night’s darkness already fills the main workshop building. Walking towards its entrance, Natasha takes a look back at the spot where she fell down, pierced by poisoned nails to her face, and notices a blood stain on the sand. Black dusty windows of the workshop yawn above her head. Attributes of different, unreal times she inhabits nowadays. Can the dead even be afraid, she asks herself. Can they feel bands of hopelessness around their bodies? Because I am dead now. The sky cracks open above me and there is neither heaven nor hell in it, only the endless sorrow of death. Simple and not scary at all, death, it consists only of blood streams and crunches of breaking gristles. Trivial, death, just like sex that terrifies in childhood, until one grows up and discovers that everybody does the thing you were so afraid of.

Natasha enters the workshop. She goes up to the second floor and sits down on its metal ground next to the bonfire remains. The smell of Sonya appears to be still palpable under these ascending archways of the construction. Natasha touches the cool ashes of the bonfire and listens to the drizzling rain slightly creaking on the cornices.

After midnight, Kostik and Ljuba return from the hunt. Feeling tired in a way intrinsic only to the dead ones, they walk round the workshop building and drag a dead stray dog by its legs. Natasha hears their steps. She takes the pistol out of her pocket. The

children pass underneath her and begin to go up the stairs. Ljuba feels Natasha’s smell and freezes at once. Unable to see her yet, Kostik points his loaded crossbow at the darkness. Natasha shoots him in the head again and again, pressing the pistol’s trigger which pops loudly into emptiness. After the first two shots Kostik falls down on the steps, the next bullet clangs against the railing, but then another two again hit the target. Natasha doesn't make the policemen's mistake, she aims at the eyes. Ljuba pulls Kostik away from the firing zone, then Natasha hides the pistol into her pocket, firmly grabs the ax and jumps down, slamming her feet on the floor. Ljuba throws an ironpiece at her and hits the leg. Natasha straightens after the jump and dashes forward with a furious roar. The girl raises the crossbow left by Kostik and launches a poisoned nail to her stomach in a short click. A terrible blow of Natasha’s ax splits her shoulder and knocks her down. Natasha sits with her knees on the boy’s chest, he wheezes, moans and covers his shot face with his hands, in three blows she chops off his head. Then she pulls the nail out of her stomach, takes Ljuba by the hair and drags her up the stairs. The girl’s knees hit the metal corners of the steps. Ljuba screeches and clings at the railing with her still obeying hand. After bringing the victim upstairs Natasha hurls her to the floor.

- Where did the blonde haired girl go? - asks she.
- Swine, - answers Ljuba wincing out of horrible pain in her chopped shoulder.
- I’ll kill you, scum, - calmly tells Natasha. - Answer me.

Ljuba keeps quiet. Natasha takes a swing and hits her with the ax at the shin, fracturing the bone. Ljuba’s thin silhouette howls and curls up on the floor.

- Don’t hit me, they went to the forest, - screams she in a voice breaking out of horror. - The one by the river.
- What for?
- I dddon’t knoow, - unbearable pain begins to tear at Ljuba’s leg and words get stuck in her mouth.

Natasha again takes her by the hair and lifts her off the ground. Ljuba covers her face with the hand. The ax hits her neck with a crackle. After the second blow, the girl’s body drops down to the floor, spraying a dark stream of blood over the wall. Natasha takes Ljuba’s head to her face, looks into dead eyes and then tosses it against the wall.

- Look here, you damned little fiend, - says she in anger, addressing the absent Sonya and wiping the axe’s blade at the clothes on the decapitated girl’s corpse. - That’s how I'm gonna kill you.

When Natasha gets out to the wet vastness of the fields she hears a distant thunder rumbling beyond the forest, however she looks around and sees no lightnings, because indeed it is not a thunder but an echo of the titanic battle of Sonya and hunchback Masha that breaks the stone walls of the filthy church. Natasha dives into the pitch-black forest and thinks about the cold charming power of stars that have descended from the skies into the underground and about her fate that loses its direction between interweaving trees that drip with water. She walks along the pathway and repeats Sonya’s route because this is the only way leading north. She finds the tree where the spooky talisman lived in its birdhouse and touches the wounds left on its bark by Tanya’s iron hand. She gets to the fresh uneven clearings covered in half-burned fallen trees and investigates the charred roofless house at the river.

The bench where Sonya slept is still full of her delicate smell, Natasha squats next to it and touches the board, smoothened by human bodies, to imagine Sonya here at her arm’s length and to see her clear eyes. And then she feels the fear because at once she realizes that waking up in that trench means that Sonya did not kill her like all the others but left her to rot on instead. Natasha cannot explain the reasons for this action but she understands that Sonya did it intentionally.

- So why didn’t you kill me? - she whispers to the bench and suddenly tears begin to flow down her cheeks. Tormenting sorrow squeezes Natasha’s cold heart, tormenting sorrow and pain. She tries to wipe her tears with the back of her hand but there are only even more of them and there is no way to hold them, as if all the ice of Natasha’s gloomy life has thawed and here comes its meltwater.

A short and muffed burst of shots crackles from the other river bank like a large wild boar that started running through the bushes.

Natasha is overwhelmed by sobbing, she shakes with her whole body and breathes heavily. She feels hopelessness of existence in this foreign cold autumn and her previous life appears to be a long dream. She remembers the yard of a construction worker’s school where she smoked together with her friends, glancing over a half-translucent wall of poplar trees growing behind the stone fence and listening to sweary girls’ talk. She remembers fierce copulations in the dark room of a dormitory that smelled like vomit, nails clawing at the edge of threadbare sheets, anguishing howls of schooltime orgasms and huffing bodies slamming against the squeaky beds. She remembers times

of autumn rains, filled with stupefying boozing and dancing in twilight hallways, but cannot remember what she felt back then, therefore this memory doesn't soothe her but rather it carries Natasha's sorrow deeper into the deadened past.

She cries for a long time until her eyes are depleted of tears, then she stands up to follow Sonya's trail to the end of the earth. She goes down from the hut to the riverbank, raindrops rustle on dried canes that grow in the water next to it. Her feet step barely audible on the sodden sandy soil and bumps of decayed grass. However, even that almost stillborn sound is enough for the white haired whiskered partisan called "Ghoul" to feel the presence of a stranger nearby.

The remains of the squad came here following the marks their comrades left on tree branches. The missing ones were a day too late for the meeting point and Bear knew they would never come back anymore. Only death could make his unbeatable fighters disobey the order. While leading the rest to an unimaginably bloody revenge, Bear thought in horror, awakened in him for the first time in many years of the war, that their last battle was about to come.

Ghoul separates from the log wall and attacks Natasha from behind, his heavy, wet and stenchy body knocks her off the feet, she falls down into the grass on her stomach. Pressing to the ground her arm that tightly grips the ax, Ghoul pushes a blade of his knife under the ribcage of his victim and orders her in a wheezing voice to hold still. But Natasha spins to her side from underneath him with an unexpected strength and takes a deafening shot out of pistol at Ghoul's stomach. In his response to that a wide army knife slashes through Natasha's side. She disregards the pain and knocks the enemy to the mug with her elbow,

frees her ax hand and crawls to the side to have some space for a swing. Ghoul grabs her by the leg and once more presses her down to the ground and twists Natasha’s ax arm with a crack. Natasha tries to shoot again but the ammo is already out and the pistol she points at the partisan’s beasty eyes only makes impotent clicks.

Bear’s bulky frame silently appears from behind the tree trunk, a tangled beard grows at the bottom part of his face in long knots. He champs in a peculiar manner and Ghoul crawls to the side, baring his fangs in anger and leaving Natasha lying still on the battleground. She gets on all fours and holds on to her slashed side. Bear looks at blood stains that cover Natasha’s blouse at the spots where police bullets pierced her body. His patched tunic is wet and dark because the squad just crossed the river by swimming.

- What’s your name? - asks he in a dull voice, as his overgrown hairy mug kind of pulls forward. More than a bear he resembles a huge monkey.
- Natasha, - answers Natasha and gets a better grip on the ax, preparing for the deadly combat.
- Who shot at you?
- Cops.
- What for?
- Killed many people, so they shot.
- How many?
- Didn’t count.
- Why did you kill?
- Because I hate them.
- So aren’t you a partisan then, - rejoices Ghoul while holding on to his stomach, shot through by Natahsa. - And I almost knifed you.

- Heck you could knife me, - angrily answers Natasha and stands up from the ground. - If there would be another bullet in the pistol I’d blow your brains out.

Another two partisans appear on the riverbank, the first is a one-eyed man nicknamed “Rat”, the second - a dark haired woman by the name of Alena called “Pox”, she wears a headscarf, browned by the road mud. Rat carries on his back a machine gun for an especially fierce fight, an AK hangs on the chest of Pox and there are three grenades on her belt. Those two barely part although they couldn’t stand each other during the lifetime, however death brought them love that requires no kisses or any other sorts of sexual caress.

- Our people disappeared here, - says Bear. - Heard anything?
- I didn’t, - answers Natasha. - Or was it them shooting on the other side of the river?
- I was shooting, - answers Pox. - Thought I saw a girl among the trees.
- Told you not to eat the toadstools, - Rat laughs in a wheezing tone, showing his rotten teeth.
- But I have lupine eyesight, - Pox speaks in resentment, - A proper fascist girl, blonde and had a german mug as well. It was far away so I gave her a burst. And then it’s just as if she vanished into thin air. I guess there was no girl after all. Otherwise that little filth wouldn’t get away from me.
- I know that girl, - interrupts Natasha. - It’s not just some girl. She is a horrible scumbag, a real fascist vermin. I myself want to kill her as well.

- Bitch has to be brought to trial, - barks Ghoul. - Pour some brass into her throat.
- Which way did she go? - Natasha addresses Pox, wincing out of pain in her side.
- There, - Pox waves her hand to the north. - The forest ends there and the german fields begin.
- We have to catch her, - decides Natasha in anger.
- Hold your horses, - says Bear. - First we need to find our people. They had headquarters in this hut.
- A glorious battle took place here, - says Pox. Burned fallen forest everywhere.
- Tanks, - growls Rat. - Tanks crushed them.
- Stop talking nonsense, - barks Bear at him. - If that were tanks they'd retreat into the forest. It's probably those new german airborne machines with no wings that can float in midair like clouds.
- Helicopters, - prompts Pox the word, she once tortured out of one of the Hitler's boys. Pox had to cut off four of his fingers before he gave out the military secret and she was very proud of her patience.
- Oh you goddamn son of a bitch, - Rat swears into the dark sky.
- Perhaps at least someone got away, - Bear speaks gloomily. - Perhaps at least Owl.

The last fifth partisan called "Leshy" breaks through the bushes. His coarse red hair is long and tangled like a camel's mane. His body is short and his spine is curved.

- There're wolf tracks on the sand at the water, - he tells Bear. - Three of ours jumped in. And there are boiled fishes stuck in the grass.

Bear takes his worn ushanka off the head. The partisans keep silent. A passing train sounds somewhere far away.

- Do you have any pistol ammo? - Natasha breaks the silence while observing her bloody palms. Nobody answers her because the squad is overwhelmed by the grief at their fallen comrades.

After sweeping through the area the partisans find remains of clothes and a dark spot on the ground where Sack fell down, leaving a long trail of dark blood on the hut's wall. They gather around it in a circle.

- Comrades fighters, - Bear bespeaks to the partisans and looks at their harsh inhuman faces. - We swear in front of our heroically fallen comrades to fight against the damned fascism till the last drop of blood, just as they did. - he turns to Natasha. - This girl, whose chest instead of love has met the enemy's bullets, we accept in our squad. She will take the place of fighters that died for the freedom of our Motherland.
- Thank you, - says Natasha.
- Tomorrow you'll be accepted to Komsomol, - decides Bear. - Pox, give out to our new fighter Natasha a sawed-off shotgun.

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Sonya steps down to the gully, limping on her wounded leg. Pox was far away from her and took a burst at her legs in order to immobilize the victim. Only one bullet hit its target but even that would have been enough hadn't Sonya become transparent like a cold night air. Sonya could only disappear completely if

she kept still and while Pox inspected the blood trail on the grass only two steps beside Sonya, she sat under the tree on fallen leaves and had to endure nasty pain and pinch the wound on her shin with a hand. The partisan inspected the area for a long time in silence, tasted the blood with her finger while pointing the barrel of an AK at tree branches. When she finally went away, taking heavy boot steps on the leaves, Sonya let the blood flow out calmly onto the ground and shut her eyes in pain. She did not know how many partisans were still moving through the night forest and felt herself tired and miserable. She thought about what would have happened if she got struck by one of Masha’s blows and golden plaster stars would forever stop in her eyes.

- It probably makes no difference to you who is your keeper, - she addresses in a whisper the talisman that warms her child’s heart underneath her skin. - You’re just as cruel as everybody else, you’re unable to love me.

The hardest thing for Sonya is the fact that she cannot hover above the naked trees and fly north without deforming her route because of their trunks, firmly driven into the soil. Maybe it is the non-flying weather or maybe Sonya got drained to the limits by pulling fire wheels out of the space, anyhow she has to go by foot despite her limping leg and the urgency to get away as soon as possible from the enemy’s pathway. In reality Sonya distresses herself for no good reason because she doesn’t know the history of the partisan movement in this area, otherwise she would stay calm, after all there are only five partisans left and they move in the opposite direction, vainly trying to find in wildlands of time their trusted war comrades.

It is wet and cold at the bottom of the gully, a frosty stream takes place in it. Sonya finds a frog that fell asleep till the springtime and eats it, warming up pieces of meat in her mouth before swallowing them. She breaks off a sharp branch and takes the bullet out of her leg, it almost went through the shin and stopped right under the skin on the other side.

Sonya gets out from the gully and walks for a long time, so long that the forest begins to thin out as if it got tired of inventing new trees in front of Sonya's eyes. Again she feels the breath of the wind on the skin of her face and soon she falls into the vastness of the fields cleared by harvesters. She walks barefoot on the frozen plowed soil and thinks about her loneliness in the Universe where tenderness of real life is absent. She thinks about extinct flowers whose buds will never open their beauty towards the sun anymore, and about birds that flew away and have nowhere to return to. Rain comes to an end, the moon shows itself from a break in the clouds and shines over the field and the tree that grows alone at the chasm of time and the rusty tractor that has sunk with its wheels into the neutral stripe between sky and earth.

Kolkhoz tractor driver Fjodor Petuhov has been driving his agricultural vehicle for twenty five years. He loved his tractor like his own mother Evdokija Alekseevna, who died of mental disorder after drunk Fjodor, while having a lay down in the fields, got overrun by a harvester and lost his legs. In a city hospital they gave Fjodor crutches instead of his legs, he could move with their help but could not drive heavy machinery anymore. Straightforward Fjodor began to drink moonshine, giving no rest to his

decimated body, and very soon he drank himself into oblivion, started to beat his wife and kids and at the new years eve even punched the communist chairman of kolkhoz, comrade Gurin, when he tried to talk sense into Fjodor regarding his family life. Due to such scumbag behavior Fjodor's wife left him and the rest of farmers kept themselves away from the embittered tractor driver who was always drunk and dreadful in his unrestrained rampage.

Once when he got wasted to the state of an angry pig, Fjodor was hobbling in a summer evening through the outskirts of the village and incoherently shouting out an obscene song when suddenly the stars above caught his attention, they were spread over the rooftops of huts that turned black in the approaching darkness. Fjodor slowed down his stumble and gazed upon the lights with his mouth wide open and then, in a mighty thrust, down his throat there came a demonic power of the legless Great Patriotic War hero, pilot Maresyev[12]. Fjodor emitted a satanic roar and began galloping across the cabbage field on the crotches, shaking his mug and spitting saliva out of his gaping maw, as if trying to get rid of the diablery that entered him. In the middle of the field he made an especially long jump, lost his balance, fell hard to the ground, threw away the crotches and started to crawl, gripping soil with his hands and pushing forward with his stumps.

But the dead pilot's power did not release Fjodor and he became decisively wild, made his living in the vastness of the fields and forgot about his crotches, in order to move through the space he used a tumbleweed method and could reach such speed that it

[12] Alexey Maresyev, Hero of the Soviet Union, piloted a fighter aircraft during World War 2. Was shot down and badly wounded, lost both of his legs. Despite his injuries learned to pilot using prosthetics and continued fighting.

was impossible for any sort of harvester or tractor to keep up with him. Fjodor fed on earth worms that he dug with his mug out of arable land and he also crushed chickens with his rolling body mass, no one dared to take them away from him and he devoured them raw while lying down under the decommissioned rusty tractor that now became his home. However, once, livestock specialist Grigory tried to put him down using a shotgun, but the bullet took no effect on Fjodor.

When limping Sonya appears on the forest's treeline that encircles Fjodor's habitat from the south, he just crawled out from underneath the tractor and is now rolling around on the ground, happy for the long rain to stop and for the flying weather to come. The moon illuminates his hair mixed with soil and the wind blows down from the skies to his face. Fjodor bares teeth, spreads his callous hands like wings and the darkness of the earth merges with the darkness of the skies for him, as it always happens before he flies off on his rusty tractor to the combat mission. Deadly silence of the autumn, pure and washed over by the rain, surrounds him. Fjodor flies alone, free of his heavy war machine.

Sonya stops in front of him, casting an almost transparent shadow from the moon that floats in the sky.

- Where are you flying to, uncle? - she asks quietly so she would not disturb the gliding of the legless man too much. - To the stars?

Fjodor throws an absent look at her.

- I'm taking rest before the training dogfight, - he answers in a reclusive manner. - Go away, girl, quit disturbing me.

- I was told there is a stone forest growing somewhere around here, - Sonya speaks modestly and bends down to touch her wounded shin.
- The stone forest is not here but rather far away, yet nobody believes in it. And I saw it from above, - says Fjodor.
- I do believe, - tells Sonya. - Will you show me the way?
- You won’t make it, girl, - sighs Fjodor, for some reason he is very touched by Sonya’s understanding, it brings him to a condition close to the human one. - Look, your leg is hurt. Let me bring you there on my plane.
- And where is your plane?
- Here it is, - Fjodor waves his hand at the tractor. - But there is no fuel.
- How can we go without fuel? - asks Sonya and inspects the covered in rust mechanism in mistrust, its wheels have sunk into the soil like into coastal waters.
- There is a bucket of fuel next to the kolkhoz museum, but no way for me to get there, I can’t go over the fence.

Sonya detects not only the lack of any flying capabilities but she even doubts the sheer mobility of the tractor and sighs.

- Don’t be sad, girl, the machine is completely fine, - Fjodor lifts himself on the fists of his straightened hands, crawls to the wheel of the tractor, crooked stars are scratched next to it with a nail, depicting a number of destroyed enemy tractors. - Go get the fuel and we’ll fly off right away.
- Alright, - wearily agrees Sonya. - So where is that kolkhoz museum of yours?

- If you go straight and reach the outskirts, there is Volodya’s hut, pass it by and go forward till you reach a fence, on the right side of it there is a gate. Knock on it and Kirilovna will open. Tell her you came to see the museum. Then grab the bucket and bring it here. Got it?
- Got it.

Limping Sonya heads towards the village. Under the moonlight she sees shabby houses of the village outskirts, they hide their senile nudity behind poor and leafless apple trees. Far away in the middle of the fields there is a single yellow lantern on the large building for storing kolkhoz machinery till the springtime. The village dogs sense approaching Sonya and begin to bark.

Kolkhoz museum looks more like a shed, a three-fingered holder for celebrative red banners sticks out of its wall. Its plaster has peeled off the walls, the yard is overgrown with wild bushes and the glass of a dark window is shattered in the middle by a stone, so it got boarded up from the inside. Sonya knocks on the piece of wood that says “Michurin’s kolkhoz museum”, it is nailed a bit askew to the fence. Nobody answers the knocking and Sonya kicks hard on the gate. The dog next door chokes on barking and rattles its strained chain. Kirilovna appears from the museum holding the camping flashlight. She puts it to Sonya’s squinting face, unable to wake up from her near-death dream. Her face is wrinkled like an old apple, it expresses fear at the arrival of an unknown creature because the old woman is worried if it is the death that came after her.

- Grandma, I came from the city to see the museum, - says Sonya while covering her eyes with her hand.

- At nighttime? - Kirilovna asks herself. - Come back in the morning. Now the museum is closed.
- In the morning I have to go to school, - lies Sonya.

Kirilovna trusts Sonya on the spot like she trusts in the reality of her otherworldly life, she opens the gate, groans and takes a notebook out of the pocket of her sheepskin coat in order to issue a ticket for the girl.

- But I don’t have any money, - Sonya makes a sad sigh. - I spent them all for the train.
- No need for money, grandchild, - says Kirilovna and extends her dried out shaking hand with a piece of paper to Sonya, some scribbles by a dull pencil are on it. - Anyhow nobody comes to see the museum nowadays.

It is cramped inside the museum, mainly it is occupied by a metal stove and a bunk of Kirilovna, across from the window on the wall there is a kolkhoz honor board upholstered in torn up scarlet velvet, pictures of kolkhoz chairman and other communists, for the most part already dead, are pinned to it. On the back wall hangs a portrait of an old man wearing professor glasses and a beard ought to picture the great selectionist Michurin in whose honor the kolkhoz was named after. Under the portrait there is a table with a two liter cucumber jar on it, dead flies and brown dirt have gathered on its bottom.

Kirilovna turns on the naked lightbulb that grows on its cable right out of the wall and tells Sonya the legendary story of the kolkhoz establishment that has its roots back in the mythical years of collectivisation and fighting against filthy forces of bloodsucking wealthy peasants. Sonya doesn’t listen to her, instead throwing a sorrowful look at the portrait

of the oldman and jerking the cord of her dirty jacket.

- What is it you have in the jar, - she asks Kirilovna out of the blue.

Baffled Kirilovna stares dully at the dusty glass of the jar with trails of a clumsily torn off label still on it.

- These, child, are the seeds of pomegranate eucalyptus that scientist Michurin presented to our kolkhoz, - finally remembers she.
- So why wouldn’t you plant them? - wonders Sonya and bends down to the jar.
- It’s a memorabilia, child. These seeds will rot away in our dead soil and the memory of the great gardener will vanish. So they stay here for many years, waiting for communism to come when all the soil will revive.
- May I have a look? - asks Sonya, grabs the jar and empties it on the table.
- No! - Kirilovna shrieks like a crone, struck dumb by such sacrilege. - What’re you doing, you little filth!

Sonya manages to notice a few big black seeds in the pile of dust and dead flies before Kirilovna pushes her away from the table. Sonya turns around and smashes Kirilovna with the jar on her head. The jar cracks and breaks into pieces in Sonya’s arms, Kirilovna staggers and falls down to the floor, putting her hand on the forehead only after that.

- You want to kill me, scum, - hoarsely says she.

Sonya climbs with her knees on the chest of Kirilovna, snatches a pillow from the bed and pushes it on the hag’s face. Kirilovna moans and twitches, choking and taking weak hits with her wrinkly fists at Sonya who uses her free hand to take a razor out of

the pocket, she slides the pillow a bit upwards and slices the hag's flabby throat. Sapped by her lifetime, her skeletal old body bleeds out for a long time, convulsing underneath Sonya in the foresight of death, then it quiets down and stiffens. After finishing the hag Sonya picks out Michurin's seeds from the pile on the table and tucks them into the pocket of her jacket. Then in the yard she finds the bucket Fjodor spoke about. It turns out to be filled with ordinary blooming rainwater.

When Sonya brings the bucket to the legless one, he already sits inside his machine and pulls long clanging levers. He pours the delivered liquid into the engine, the tractor hoarsely coughs, janks on the spot and starts a loud rattle. Sonya reaches the cabin's step right on time when Fjodor, who swings and howls furiously in his saddle, moves the machine from its nest. The swaying tractor gets out onto a rural road. Legless Fjodor curbed its shaking rusty hunch and now confidently drives north, shouting out to himself some orders in harsh language and occasionally emitting a sudden and vicious howl.

At cloudy dawn Sonya climbs on the chopped knees of the tractor driver, puts her arms around his neck, leans the head on his chest and falls asleep, tired of the past night. And lone Fjodor continues driving her to the places he has never been to himself.

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Pox wheezes and squirms on the grass, pale green foam creeps out of her mouth and the pupils are not visible at all behind her gaping eyelids.

- Damn, look how she twitches, all after three toadstools, - says Bear in respect while mending his hat.
- Watch out, Pox, you might drop off, - worries Rat, he walks around his lying girlfriend and squeaks with his machine gun-worn shoulders.
- Toadstool power, - says Bear and bites off the thread.

Natasha lies down, leaning on her elbow next to the fallen tree trunk, and watches how the torn up by shamanism partisan rips at grass with her fingers. Leshy smokes a roll-up and cleans his weapon, vacantly staring at the river. Invisible Ghoul takes guard in the bushes. The rain has stopped, the pale moon mysteriously peeks out from the gray shadowy clouds.

- I see it! - suddenly screams Pox who just made a breakthrough, she pokes at the skies with her hand and spits out the foam. Rat falls onto her and firmly holds her by the shoulders while a vicious seizure shakes the strong body of his girlfriend. - I see gardens of fire that grow upon black waters! I see a girl walking north, rushing north, tearing up the skin of the earth! Devil drives her, devil carries her, tireless fascist force! Birds rupture flesh, tear, tear apart bloody flesh! Tear juicy meat, spray blood! - the screams of Pox descend into a delirious abyss. - Blue mugs! Bloody flesh! - howls she multiple times, arching in Rat’s hands. - Blue mugs, bloody flesh!

Leshy hurries up to help Rat and pours a pot of ice cold river water over Pox’s head. Bear stands up and jams the hat on his head. Through narrow wrinkly slits in the face his eyes look north in an unkind way as if contemplating how to end the whole world.

In the unclear light of the infant November morning, a car with an inscription that says “Bread” stops on the bridge over the river. The driver honks a few times, jumps down to the asphalt and walks to the lowered barrier. His unshaved mug’s distorted reflection in the window of the booth resembles a spiny pig snout. He slams with a crowbar at the barrier and shouts foul language at the booth, rolling out his watery eyes. In response there sounds an AK burst. The driver twitches as the bullets hit him and heavily falls down to the asphalt on his back, making a clank with his crowbar. Through the murk appears the bow-legged figure of Leshy that keeps his hand on the weapon and smokes a roll-up, first he pokes the driver’s face with his boot and then scrupulously inspects the truck. His short whistle means that the car is all right. Partisans emerge from under the bridge like from under the earth itself, throw out the boxes with enemy supplies into the water and board the cargo bay. Leshy steps over the corpse of the fascist controller that lays in the booth, raises the barrier and gets into the cabin. The truck roars while crossing the river and a growing anger sounds in this roar.

It is already light outside when Sonya wakes up. Thick smoky clouds move above her, rims in their breaches are illuminated by the rays of autumn sun. The tractor’s rumble tears apart the quiet of the fields which are falling into winter sleep. Five birds float in an uneven wedge on the small wind wave, heading to the east, presuming that where the sun is rising, there is still much warmth and light. Lying down with her cheek on the strong chest of Fjodor, Sonya yawns and looks sleepily at the passing fields.

The partisans catch up with the tractor around noon as the road crosses through a leafless forest. Their truck advances forward, stops about fifty meters down the road, turns around and slowly drives towards the tractor. The partisans jump down from the cargo bay into the off road mud and proceed on their feet, keeping themselves behind the car.

- Surrender, scum! - screams Leshy out of the cabin, rocking forward on the road bumps.
- Surrender, scum! - screams Pox and cocks her AK.

Fjodor slows down but doesn't turn off the engine. Sonya gets off from his knees, making no sudden moves to avoid the shooting. Her body is slightly shaking, afraid of the heavy bullet impact. Surrendering, she lifts up her hands.

- Take them alive, - barks out Bear and takes heavy steps, crushing the water-filled mud track.

The two vehicles' convergence slowly continues. Fjodor blindly stares at the truck's dirty windshield and the soviet car's scary pop-eyed face, baring its gill maw. Natahsa walks on the left side of the truck and grips at the sawed-off shotgun with her varnished nails. A thin strand of hair falls on her face and she blows it off through the clenched teeth. There is a bandage on her waist that tightens the wounded side. She looks into the bright translucent eyes of Sonya, calm and still like stars. She looks at the uncombed hair of Sonya and her lifted hands, thin wrists sticking out of the sleeves of her jacket. She looks at the girl's open palms, demonstrating that she has no weapons, and sees a one meter circle shining in pale yellow light in the air above her fingertips. Like enchanted Natasha looks at the clear sun ring, slightly blurred by the field's wind, till it takes

off, propels in silence through the space, shatters the truck’s windshield and sets its cabin ablaze.
In a horrific howl Leshy jumps out of the cabin to the roadside, his clothes are on fire. Natasha searches for Sonya with her eyes to shoot her with the sawed-off shotgun but Sonya is not there anymore and she only sees the furious face of Fjodor who drives the tractor right at her, to pass by the left side of the truck abandoned by its driver. Natasha dashes into the treeline and shoots the tractor driver on the move, from behind her Bear opens fire with his AK. Bullets splinter Fjodor’s body, tear off bloody pieces of flesh mixed with clothes, but the firm hands of the legless one accelerate the satanically roaring machine more and more. Bear takes a step aside, continuously putting bullets one after the other into Fjodor, Rat’s machine gun begins to chirp from somewhere on the other side of the road, overlapping the engine’s sound. The tractor’s tires explode, it begins to slip in the mud. Somewhere on the other side the truck crashes into a tree, completely smashing its burning cabin. A fire wave comes through the tractor, piercing with its flames Bear, who stands in the middle of the road track. The squad commander screams in fury out of pain and backs away towards the cover of the trees. Natasha notices Sonya running away on the road far ahead of the tractor, she lost her invisibility because of her fast movement. Natasha puts the sawed-off shotgun at her shoulder and takes aim. Sonya’s silhouette blurs in the hot air of the tractor, there, engulfed in flames, legless Fjodor finds his funeral, worthy of a mighty viking. Then Sonya just vanishes into thin air. Natasha screams in fury and anger and begins to run in heavy steps after her, but the road ahead is entirely empty and soon she

stops and sobs helplessly, lifts up her sawed-off shotgun and shoots into the lifeless forest without aiming.

And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me:
Fear not; I am the first and the last:
I am he that liveth, and was dead;
and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen;
and have the keys of hell and of death.

Revelation 1.17 - 1.18

Black Moscow

Sonya tears off her jacket and drops it on the road while running away from the battleground, she doesn't notice that there are no more partisans or burning cars behind her anymore. She stops only when light snowflakes appear from the air, they stick to her face and stay on the skin in cold droplets. She covers her eyes with her wrist, looks back and sees only a field under the infinite snowy sky. It's so quiet in the field that one can hear snowflakes rustle against each other. Sonya walks down the road covered in white coating, leaving a small barefoot trail, until a wide dark stripe of stone trees appears in front of her.

The stone forest is filled with cemetery-like snowy tranquility. Sonya reflects neither in the mirrored bark of black tree trunks that ascend into the foggy abyss of winter skies, nor in the pearly shimmering labyrinth of anthracite branches, as if she doesn't exist in reality at all. Here the snow falls continuously and slowly, undisturbed by the wind, and no bird interrupts the stillness of the trees, shrouded at some point by the indestructible eternity of their new substance.

Sonya walks further into the forest, feeling the burning breath of the frost that reigns in it, but the

snow doesn’t sting her bare feet anymore and is now merely wrapping them in its soft palms with a tender crunching sound. Through the curtain of falling snowflakes Sonya begins to distinguish frozen silhouettes of dead pioneers standing among the snowbanks, they raise their hands in a salute and look with their blue faces straight into the eternal peace of winter. Crimson ties blaze on their necks, snowflakes melt on the silk cloth, unable to extinguish cosmic flames of children’s memories. Sonya passes them by, looking into their calm young faces with clear eyes, just as her own. She finds Tanya among them, standing straight next to the mirror tree trunk, hand raised up, and this new hand that knows no rat blood and poisonous night rain seems to be cleaner than all of Tanya’s remaining body, washed thoroughly by death itself.

- Do you recognize me, Tanya? - asks Sonya in a whisper, standing in front of her. Tanya keeps quiet. Her eyes stare through Sonya into the vertical flow of the light. Sonya turns around and sees Alexey standing against Tanya, his face is not grim anymore but full of a pure and bright reflection of time that is bound to come many years later.
- Tanya, it’s me, Sonya, - Sonya touches the girl's face with her fingers. Tanya’s skin is cold like river ice. She doesn’t hear Sonya’s voice and continues looking at her friend Alexey. Her whimpers are covered in frosting and her hair is full of snowflakes that fell from the skies. Sonya puts her palms on Tanya’s cheeks and breathes into her face. But even her hot breath can’t melt the permafrost of Tanya’s enchanted dream.

Sonya walks though the stone forest and from time to time approaches frosty boys or girls, trying in vain to make them remember about life. She strokes the pioneers with her hands, kisses their blue faces with their golden lips, presses her burning heart against them. But severe eternal frost that has no temperature is stronger than Sonya's love and the pioneers carry on their salute and the snow continues to fall, like petals of icy cherry trees that bloom up in the skies, and mirror trees, as if covered in negative film, reflect its steady movement downwards.

The forest gets thinner and Sonya walks out to the endless marble cosmodrome. There is no snow on it, but frosty spikes still pierce Sonya's feet when she steps barefoot on the polished black stone. A massive black pyramid stands in the middle of the stone space and twelve beautiful Komsomol girls with braided hair and black knee-long dresses hold in their hands torches that burn in bluish flames of communist spring.

Sonya slowly approaches the pyramid and snowflakes melt on her unblinking eyes. She walks to the stairway that rises along the wall of the pyramid to its top. The Komsomol girls descend to her, stepping silently on the wide marble steps with their slender bare feet.

- Hello, brave girl, - whispers one of them with chestnut-color hair. - Finally you came, girl with a spooky talisman in the chest, for the sun of hope could rise above the eternal winter, - the Komsomol girl bends down to Sonya and kisses the temple of her head.
- Who are you? - asks Sonya.
- We are archangels of the revolution, - the girls whisper together in one voice. - We are vestals of the Black Pyramid, keepers of the eternal fire of communism, we are Komsomol girls that died

young and sinless, we gather human blood so the fire of communism will not die out in the hearts of future generations. Our feet that walk the steps of holy stone don’t know uncomfortable shoes, our ears that hear all the sounds of the world - golden earrings, nails that touch sacrificial piyalas - chemical nail polish, and mouths that carry the prophetic word of communism - lying lipstick. Our braids cannot be undone because the testament of our leader braids them together, our dresses cannot be taken off because the testament of our leader binds them, our thoughts are always pure because the thought of our leader lasts in them infinitely…

- Lenin, - quietly pronounces Sonya while shutting her eyes. - He is close.
- Lenin is asleep, - whispers the Komsomol girl with chestnut-color hair called Vera. - In his Black Mausoleum on the Black Square of the Black Kremlin.
- Asleep? - asks Sonya.
- Eternal frost shackles the leader, the force of the terrible curse guards his mortal sleep, - whispers the second girl with brown hair called Zhenya. - Nobody can enter the Black Mausoleum because there is no way to get in. Only you can do it, brave girl with the spooky talisman in the chest. But for that you need to enter the Black Kremlin that is guarded by dead communists. They can bring final death upon you. They can make you disappear forever. They casted everything into eternal frost. Soon they will get to this place as well because the fire of communism gets weaker. It lacks pure human blood.

- Yes, human blood became tainted, - sighs the black haired thin Komsomol girl with the facial features that appear familiar to Sonya. - More and more it resembles pig blood.
- Did I see you somewhere? - asks Sonya, - Your face seems familiar.
- Of course you saw me, - the girl smiles in gentle sadness. - Look, - she pulls the collar of the dress with her hand and shows a purple bruise on her neck.
- Zoya, - recognizes Sonya. - So you live here. It means they didn't manage to hang you to death.
- I was alive even before the revolution and human death has no power over me. But soon we will all die. Soon the eternal frost of time will shroud us.
- No, says Sonya. - I'll go and wake up Lenin.
- I feel very sorry for you, brave girl, - says Zoya. - But you don't have enough power to defeat the dead communists. You will die just as many others that came to Lenin before you.
- She has the spooky talisman in her chest, - Vera interrupts her. - Maybe it will help her.
- How about you? - asks Sonya. - Won't you help me?
- We cannot leave the Black Pyramid, - answers the Komsomol girl with a broken lip called Anya. - Such is the testament of our leader and it is not in our power to break it. We must protect the fire of communism till the end. Perhaps our faith was not strong enough. We cannot survive away from the sacred flame.
- But we can do something for you, - quietly adds Zoya. - We will give you a piece of holy fire. Just a bit, because it is already weak.

Zoya turns around and walks to the wall of the Black Pyramid, merges with her reflection and disappears. Soon she returns with a sparkle of blinding light in her hand.

- This will be enough for one person to break the death's frost outside, - whispers she while moving the fire into the outstretched hand of Sonya. - Sweet girl, this is all we can help you with. And now farewell, you must hurry before the sparkle in your hand goes out.

Again, the cosmic frost fills Sonya as she walks away from the Black Pyramid to such an extent - it gets hard to breathe. In her cupped palms she carries the sparkle of holy fire into the stone forest, afraid that falling snow might extinguish it on the way. The fire warms her palms more and more softly and Sonya runs, pressing her hands to the chest and sliding on the black marble. She races to the very first pioneer that stands with his back towards her and presses the sparkle of the gifted flame with her hands to his back.

For a while the pioneer keeps motionless and Sonya holds her breath, looking at his thin hand raised in salute. Finally, the hand slowly moves down and wipes the frosting off his face.

- Hey, - says Sonya. Her voice sounds somewhat strange in the oppressing snowy silence of the stone forest.

The boy turns around to Sonya. He has a thin face and dark curly hair. A pioneer drum is hanging on his chest.

- It's me who woke you up, - says she. - Lenin's cause is in danger. While he's asleep the fire of communism might go out. He must be awakened at any cost.

The pioneer raises his eyes to the skies, as if recalling something, and Sonya gets afraid that, in his frosty dream, he may have forgotten who Lenin is, but at once the boy's hands grab the drumsticks and the pioneer alarm's dry drumbeat sounds in the stone forest. The drummer beats desperately, his face distorted, and Sonya sees as all around the forest dead pioneers wake up from the dream, prepared to fulfill their holy duty.

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- Hit her yet, - barks Ghoul when he notices a jacket Sonya dropped on the road.
- It's just a jacket, - coldly says Leshy while looking through field binoculars. - And there's no girl in it. The scum got away.

Pox swears and spits into unusually clean snow that lies on the roadside of the abandoned road. Leshy turns the binoculars perpendicularly to the road and sees endless black walls of Moscow in it.

- It's Moscow, - he wheezes in bliss. - Moscow, fellas.

Bear takes binoculars from Leshy and looks in it for a long time while sniffing the falling snow. The partisans obey his mute sign, step off the road and walk towards the Black Moscow through the snowy fields. Their weathered faces wrinkle from the intensifying frost. Barely audible, Rat begins to sing a gloomy partisan song telling about hopeless sadness of the living dead dropped behind the enemy lines.

The walls of Moscow silently grow from the snowy desert like a huge armored ship that crawls upon the partisans. The metal of her AK freezes Natasha's hands

to the ache in the bones, icy nails pierce her eyes deeper and deeper, squeezing out some painful tears that drop from her white cheeks, and her dried lips tighten into motionless resemblance of a smile. With this doll’s smile Natasha walks on the lumpy field and a cold bloody sea lazily washes over a desolated winter shore in front of her eyes.

- Hold, - quietly orders Bear. A man in a military overcoat wearing a ushanka with a half-faded crimson star stands beside the pathway of the squad. The partisans silently descend to the snow.
- Hey, fella! - Ghoul shouts to the soldier. - Who would you be?

The soldier turns around. His face is covered in permanent wrinkles of past battles. He has a rifle in his hands.

- Me is a simple soldier, - he answers in a plain manner. - I don’t even have a name.
- Drop the rifle or I shoot, - screams Rat, placing a machine gun.
- Shoot, you bastard, bullets can’t harm me, - says the soldier calmly. - I’m standing here on guard, soon there’ll be an enemy offensive.

Bear takes a single shot to try him. The bullet pierces the soldier's tunic on his chest and leaves not a single drop of blood behind.

- He’s one of us, - howls Bear, looking into the ragged hole on the tunic, emptiness is darkening behind it. - Tell us where the enemy is, we’ll stand to our last.
- Here’s the last line of defense, - answers the soldier. - Moscow is right behind us.

Taking no effort in digging the frozen ground, the partisans lie down in the field and prepare for the

fight. The Unknown Soldier stands in front of them like a banner. Natasha places herself behind a lump of chilled soil and unpacks her cartridges on a bloody handkerchief that she spreads on the snow. She closes her eyes so they will hurt less in this frost. A drum beat sounds from far away.

- Here they come, - quietly wheezes Ghoul. - Here they come, bastards.

The dead pioneers move in sparse formation, marching in barefooted steps. Crimson ties on their necks burn through the blizzard like children's blood. They come ever closer and the song of their drums rushes upwards, speaking about the immense and eternal joy to die in Lenin's duty. This song flies over the beautiful white children's faces that glow in happiness of justified death and the partisans freeze in their graves like frogs that crawled over to the January ice. The children's golden lips move in a transparent pioneer oath, its power grows so that even the veil of snowflakes that fall from the skies turns golden.

- Forward! - madly shouts the Unknown Soldier and walks at the enemy, raising his bayonet. - Forward, fellas!

But the partisans can't get behind him. They already see the clear eyes of the advancing pioneers and read the final death in them.

- Hooray! - screams the Unknown Soldier without speeding his step. - Hooray!

Stripes of fire spread from his boots over the snowy fields, crashing into rows of pioneers and sowing sizzling death among them. Some pioneers fall into the snow with a thin cry and turn into blue ashes. The pioneers' hands wave in salute and a blue lightning connects the field with invisible skies. The Unknown

Soldier falls, torn in half by the electricity, the snow evaporates from his body and becomes rain in the branches of lightning creeks. The pioneers wave their hands again and the second lightning strikes the Soldier, killing thousands of lives contained within him. For a few times the Soldier gets up and falls down again and again, till the last strike incinerates his emptied body, that remains lying in the field forever, engulfed in eternal fire.

The partisans look at this reprisal in silence. Dead pioneers walk past the Soldier, reforming their ranks on the way to fill the gaps made by fire. Natasha can already distinguish their faces and she recognizes Tanya, who once threw a crowbar at her head, and her finger presses the trigger. For a second the shot overlaps the drumroll, partisans wake up from the damned stupor and open fire. A few pioneers drop to the snow, torn by bullets. Again, their thin hands make a sharp salute and lightnings batter the frozen ground. Natasha reloads her sawed-off shotgun with her shaking hands and sees the burning body of Leshy with his face down to the snow and the blood that spreads around him in a dark stain, slowly soaking the snow. Leshy’s head is cracked like a half-eaten melon. Grenades, thrown by Pox, explode somewhere ahead. Two pioneers, a boy and a girl, fly up into a blizzard and fall to the ground with their heads down, breaking their necks. Another boy lays next to the crater with his hands spread and his body torn off below the stomach, the blood gushes out of him and his guts slide down the pit. Natasha aims at Tanya’s face but, out of the vicious thunder, it darkens in her eyes and she falls down with her mouth on the barrel of the sawed-off shotgun, spreading her hair into bloody snow.

This very same blow throws Pox back, tearing off her hand that holds the AK, and smashes her back against the hard soil. Pox’s clothes are full of blood. The time slows down for her, the snow hangs in midair unable to drop on her face. She turns her head and looks at her severed arm that paints the snow in crimson color, further - at the pieces of the big commander’s body, scattered in a few meter radius in a bloody circle, and further - at the mutilated corpse of one-eyed Rat with his throat split, frozen at his machine gun that choked on its barking, at the body of Natasha gripping at her sawed-off shotgun in her sleep, at Ghoul that wearily crawls forward, towards the enemy. She watches as he pulls the pin of the grenade and as stone clods of earth fly upwards. The blast wave burns Pox’s face, drops of fresh blood fall on her cheeks. She sees the boy’s face bending down to her and believes she sees an angel, after so many years she remembers prayers of her mother in pre-war times and the icon next to the stove inhabited by cockroaches. Golden lips touch her clenched mouth and an electric shock permanently punctures her throat.

Natasha opens her eyes. There is an endless movement of snow, like swarms of white furry moths that hurry to leave an offspring in their short lifetime. Sonya sits on her knees next to her. They find themselves at the bottom of the silence. Natasha feels that the end is near. The mute sight of death stopped its way on her. She begins to hear the single sound, the sound of the blood flowing deep inside the sky.

- How can it be this way? - she asks Sonya quietly.
  - After all there is no life anywhere else.
- You know nothing about life - answers Sonya. - Here, drink, - she presses her wrist to Natasha’s mouth. - Take your blood back.

- I don’t want to, - whispers Natasha. - I’m tired of walking.
- Drink, - gently tells Sonya. - I love you.

Natasha carefully bites at the girl’s wrist. Fiery blood burns her mouth, she moans in pain.

- Drink, - patiently repeats Sonya, pressing the wrist harder to Natasha’s mouth.

Natasha sucks out two gulps of blood and Sonya takes off her hand.

- I hear the song of the sun, - says Natasha and a pale smile strikes over her face. - One can’t see it but I hear it singing.
- That’s good, - answers Sonya putting a piece of snow over her wound. - It means death is over. You’re alive again.
- How can I be alive? - Natasha doesn’t believe her. - The sorrow of posthumous wandering is inside me.
- It will pass, - says Sonya. - Can you feel your blood getting red again? Like blooming roses.

Natasha spreads her hands to the sides and puts them in the cold snow. The vast space doesn’t seem alien to her anymore if there is Sonya who loves her. Natasha takes a breath of the space and gets filled by the cold of eternal love.

- I have to go now, - says Sonya. - The assault is about to begin.
- I’ll come with you, - says Natasha.
- No, you’ll go there, - Sonya points to the direction the partisans came from. - The seeds of evil have sprouted already a long time ago. Find them and help me. If I’ll stay alive, - sadly adds she.
- If you’ll stay alive? - repeats Natasha in fear.

- We'll all die without Lenin, - Sonya speaks confidently. - Without Lenin everything will die. There will be only everlasting frost.

Sonya gets up and goes towards Black Moscow. In the distance a pioneer drum starts its beat. Walking the snowy fields, Natasha looks back and sees how formations of dead pioneers approach the city walls. "Blue nights, run up like bonfires!"[13] - the advancing pioneers sing. The black gate with skull engravings on them open up and black chekists[14] silently walk out of them. They have no human faces, like dolls that are made out of soft matter. They raise their rifles and shoot in a muffed crackle without aiming. And every silver bullet hits right in the heart. Pioneers fall down, blood spreads from their white shirts into the snow, their bodies begin to burn, turning into short-lived bright bonfires. In blueish flashes of lightnings more and more chekists walk out of the gate's maw. Natasha runs forward and doesn't look back anymore. The earth is trembling with thunder and it stretches in front of her with no end as if damned Galileo has tricked mankind.

She runs away, jumping over frozen lumps of soil and screaming in fear, because she doesn't know what awaits her in the desolated spaces of the fields. The road with Sonya's jacket appears in front of her, two meter tall stems with leaves and thick buds grow right next to it in the snow. Out on her feet, Natasha walks to the plants, clenching her teeth till it hurts. They grow before her eyes, barely visible but inevitably, spreading into the frosty space of the death's kingdom.

[13] The young pioneers' march.

[14] Members of Extraordinary Commission (abbr. "ЧК", "CheKa"), first secret agency established by Bolsheviks after the October Revolution, precursor of KGB. "Chekist" stuck as a name for all agents also in later years.

- Damn sunflowers, - says Natasha the name that came into her head out of nowhere. - Damn sunflowers, sweet flowers of evil.

By their own will her hands reach for the closed buds that have raised through the cold bareness of impenetrable frost out of Michurin’s seeds. She already understands their new feature, created not by nature but by scientific sorcery, and the tender happiness of knowledge lights up her face.

- Look! - screams Natasha, facing the empty skies. - Look what I got for you! - her hands tear apart the dense buds’ sides and unwrap the petals that shine in yellow color.

One after the other Natasha opens the sunflowers, staring at already blackened seeds, as if they were charred by some infernal flames. And the rain begins to fall. Far away, at the walls of Black Moscow, Sonya laughs in joy and stretches her arms towards the water that flows down from the skies. A huge rainbow emerges over the battlefield. Burning light appears through the white abyss of snowy clouds, it is the sun that shows itself, drawn by the damned sunflowers.

Dead chekists meet this artificial spring with a howl and try to hide in the maw of black walls. They catch fire on the way before they even fall down and the melting snow gets covered in piles of burning ashes. They drop down and roll on the ground, trying to extinguish the flames that burn them up from the inside. And somewhere in the melting fields a young girl with a beautiful peasant face tenderly unwraps the petals of dreadful flowers, full of love towards the insensate plant life, she whispers to them the words of the unknown language that the sun speaks in.

Tanya takes the drum off the pioneer killed by the silver bullet and plays a wake up beat on it. The

singing pioneers enter Black Moscow, walking on the burning piles of bodies. Vanishing warriors of death burn all over the streets and Sonya is horrified by their huge numbers. Their burning emits such a heat that meltwaters gather up in streams and flow under the feet of the pioneers. A black old fashioned car stands askew in the middle of an empty avenue, its front part is engulfed in flames and on the back seat there is a thin officer in a leather coat with his head thrown back. Blood drips out of cracks in his small round glasses. The officer's face has a dark earthy tone to it. Sonya walks to the car, then using two fingers takes the glasses of the dead one and smashes them against the asphalt. The corpse in the car slowly covers in flames because the glasses of Beria[15] can't help him see into the future anymore and avoid the gaze of death.

The sun throws an unbearable glare in the puddles of meltwaters. Driven by the drumbeat, the pioneers walk down the streets of Black Moscow past uninhabited houses with broken windows and half-crumbled walls, browned out of time. The gigantic city that surrounds them is dead, nobody lives in it and its buildings decay by themselves, crushed by the pointlessness of their existence.

Sonya's sharp eyes see black stripes at the end of a long street and her sensitive nostrils catch the stripes of a terrible stench that flows over the squad of the little victorers. She understands that a new enemy rallies ahead of them and he is even more scary and dangerous than the previous one. Sonya stops her warriors with a shout and walks alone towards the wind that carries the unbearable stench with it.

[15] Lavrentiy Beria, chekist, notorious chief of NKVD (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) during Stalin's rule.

Wait for me, - Natasha’s voice sounds in her temples. It’s my turn to kill them. Sonya obeys and stops in the middle of the street to wait.

After Natasha smoothened the petals of the last sunflower, she lay down into the blackened snow and began to look at the blue sky, calling for birds that flew away to the south forever. She wished for the second sun to come out, just as bright as the first one, because the sun probably feels lonely in the endless blue space, it has no Sonya, no little clear-eyed sister who could love it. And let those two suns burn away all the living, thought Natasha, it doesn’t matter, let the boiling heat sweep the earth, let it all die because the nature of everything is not life after all.

And then the earth next to her cracked open, indeed it was a frozen river and its pieces began to float through the melting field and fresh spring air broke into the released water and the river devil came out of the water, he was leading a black dead horse by the reins and his head was pierced through by a bullet but the wound had healed with time.

- You melted the ice of eternal winter, beautiful girl, - said the river devil in a hissing voice. - You returned the fishes into the world of light, you freed me from death's curse. Take my horse and my saber because I feel how much you enjoy killing.

Natasha stepped into the mud and took the rusty saber out of his greenish hand. The malachite eyes of the river devil were glowing with the new youth, he bared his fangs in resemblance of a happy smile.

- Finally my saber will get stained in blood again, - hissed he. - Now there is no need for me to keep it on the river bottom. Ride, beautiful

girl, wreak death. Ride and kill, let your hand not get tired to hack and slice. Hack and slice.

Natasha put her boot into the stirrup, climbed the back of the horse that wheezed in anger under her, and rushed forward. The saber seemed to have grown to her palm and Natasha felt the immense power of death raising in her chest. She looked back at the spot the river devil was standing but he wasn't there anymore. And then she remembered where she saw that sly moustached face before. The horse carried her through the melting fields, the wind hitting her in the eyes, it smelled like eternal spring. Love and hate merged into one enormous tormenting feeling, a fire of inhuman freedom burned in her blood. Nobody could stop her because the second spooky talisman was in her hand - the saber of the Civil War hero - red horseman Chapaev[16].

When dead sailors begin to run in their bayonet charge with a terrible roar, Sonya launches fire at them. Its blow tears apart two bulky brown bodies into stenchy pieces, Sonya backs away and launches fire again but there are too many sailors, she cannot stop their black wave. The drum starts its beat again and blue lightnings strike from the clear sky as if the firmament would be one flat plate of an electric capacitor that collects the deadly energy in its palm. Sonya runs back and the sailors crash into the pioneer formations, stabbing children's bodies with bayonets and smashing their heads with rifle butts. The sailors roar like beasts in their murder spree, their boots stomp over the corpses of pioneers that fell on the asphalt, mash them and soil them with earthy mud.

[16] Legendary red commander of the infantry regiment during the Civil War. Circumstances of his death are not entirely clear, the popularized version says he drowned, being wounded and trying to cross the river.

Their leader, a massive sailor-partisan, Zheleznyak[17], fights his way to the drummer girl and sticks the long bayonet into her face like a pitchfork, breaking Tanya's skull and rupturing her throat with this blow. The girl falls on her back and her drumsticks convulsively strike the ground for a few times till her hands freeze still. In a further move the sailor steps on Tanya's stomach, breaking the ribs with his huge weight. One of the pioneers rushes at Zheleznyak from behind and grips on the back of his head. Seizure takes over the face of the sailor when powerful electricity charges strike from boy's hands, but the sailor still manages to hit with his rifle buttle over his shoulder and Alexey lets off his hands and falls down with a cracked skull. The sailor turns around and sticks the bayonet in his belly like a shovel, leaning on his bent leg he lifts the jerking body of Alexey into air to toss him away to the side of the street. And then the wheezing horse races past him and Chapaev's saber, in a whoosh, takes off the sailor's big head with his slanted eyes on a swollen face, and his gigantic body drops to the road like a stone, splashing a fountain of stinky blood all over it.

Natasha takes a long swing and splits the second sailor askew, by the third one she first chops off his arm, then the head, and then she throws the horse forwards to crush with its hooves the chest of the fourth one that holds his arm at the neck, wounded by the lightning. One of the sailors stabs the horse's side with his bayonet and spills out the coal-black blood, the rider turns around and chops up his head like a watermelon, down to the collarbone, splashing his stinky brain all over the face of a blonde pioneer

[17] Anatoli Zhelezniakov, anarchist commander of the sailor squad that stormed the Winter Palace during the October Revolution, later cooperated with Bolsheviks.

girl that stands beside. The saber makes one swooshing swing after another and sailors, having already lost their leader, begin to waver. Natasha chops from top to bottom, leaning on the stirrups and putting the whole weight of her body into every blow till her back hurts, she raises the saber behind her back and strikes, making sharp turns with her body at the enemy. She screams like a bird while splitting bones and muscles of men’s mighty bodies to release the streams of dark blood that pump out of them in a gurgling flow.

A group of sailors gathers in front of her in a short line, pointing bayonets forwards, but Sonya launches the fire and it cuts through their formation, breaking it in the middle, then crackling blows of the saber finally break the enemy’s resistance. The sailors run and Natasha chases them, killing every victim with a single precise and powerful strike. She screams like a wild animal while riding through the streets of the dead city and echoes of empty windows follow her screams. She kills until there is nobody left to kill anymore and only then she rides back to the battlefield in a predatory trot. Sonya sits on the ground next to Tanya’s corpse, her palms are immersed in meltwater.

- Go back, - says Sonya to a few surviving pioneers. - You can’t go further. You have to stay and keep the eternal salute.

The pioneers look at the bodies of fallen comrades in silence and sorrow. There are no tears in their eyes.

- You have won, - says Sonya. - Your faith was stronger. Noone stands in my way anymore.

She gets up and walks towards Natasha, who is approaching, wrapped in the halo of sunbeams. Clean meltwater streams over the ankles of Sonya. She greets

Natasha’s return with a shout and her friend answers, lowering her eyelashes into warm spring light.

The sailors’ black corpses cut down by Natasha lie all over the shimmering street, water washes tar-like blood out of their bodies. A sailor hat with short ribbons passes by Sonya in the water, making slow spins on its surface. The stream flows in swirls and whirlpools around the hooves of Natasha’s horse. Sonya looks back and sees the departing pioneers and reflections of blind destroyed buildings in the water. Continuing her way, Sonya remembers with sadness Tanya and Alexey and bids them a mental farewell in silence, interrupted by murmurs of the stream and splashes of her own steps. She takes the stirrup and leads Natasha to the Black Kremlin. Wind ruffles their hair.

Towers of the Kremlin appear between the buildings, crowned with burning stars. They burn above the wall in unreachable height, the wind carrying white clouds through it. Sonya holds still, amazed by the magnificent sight of a magical peace gathered in azure space above the capital of death. And then the earth starts trembling under her feet. With the sensitive skin of her bare feet Sonya can precisely identify the blow coming from the right side, she turns her face leaning her head slightly backwards to take a look from behind Natasha who blocks her view. She sees a gargantuan figure with its head up in the skies. A stone Lenin.

He emits a horrible roar, facing the skies with his vicious marble face, and because of his roar the weakened walls of far away buildings fall into pieces. He takes another step and crushes a five story house that stands in his way so that the dust raises up to his waist. Natasha drags Sonya atop of the horse.

- Ride forwards! - screams Sonya trying to outvoice the sound of another mad roar.

Natasha gallops right to the Kremlin’s gates. The stone giant walks towards them in huge steps, smashing all the impeding buildings with his knees. On his way he rips out a concrete traffic light post and throws it at the riders like a club. It rotates a few times in the air, flies over the Kremlin wall and crashes into huge spruce trees.

Following it, Natasha races through the black Square towards the Mausoleum, and the hooves clatter loudly on the marble slabs. She stops the horse next to the black pillars, drops off Sonya who keeps running further by herself, she crashes into a monolithic stone wall and it absorbs her like the eternal darkness. Sonya finds herself in a small room lightened by a dusty bulb, a casket with a glass top lies in the middle of it and inside the casket lies Lenin.

His eyes are closed, his chest is not heaving with breath. His face is colored in a newspaper sort of yellow. He is dressed in a black suit and a white shirt, hands folded on the chest.

- Lenin is dead, - says the voice of the stone monster inside Sonya’s head.
- You’re lying, - answers Sonya, running out of breath, and breaks the top of the casket with a blow of her hand. Its shards fall down to the floor. Blood flows out from the cut on Sonya’s hand.

The Kremlin walls, broken through by the monster’s marble leg, collapse in a horrible rumble.

- Wake up, Lenin - asks Sonya.
- He is dead, - repeats the golem in a vicious roar. - You believed in a fairy tale. Lenin is

dead since long ago. Why did you break the casket? Now you will die too. You will die forever. You will never see the sun again. You will die forever.

- You lie, you bastard, - cries Sonya. - You lie!

But she understands that he is not lying. Gargantuan Lenin out of marble is indeed alive. Decades of people's worship gave life to the golem. And this little human body lying in the casket in front of Sonya is just a dried corpse of a long dead sick old man.

- Lenin is dead since long ago. Why did you break the casket? Why did you disturb the peace? Now you will die.

The roar gets unbearable for human hearing. Sonya puts her hands on her ears.

- Get out or I will crush the Mausoleum.

Sonya wipes her tears, she doesn't want the golem to see her crying. Before walking out to the square she bends down to the breathless face of Lenin and kisses him farewell on his forehead that smells like hospital chemicals. And then Lenin opens his eyes.

- Hello, girl, - he starts on joyfully as if Sonya didn't wake him up but merely met him in the corridor in front of his office. - Is it already time to wake up?

Sonya is not able to answer him. Lenin gets up from the casket and cleans his jacket off the dust and glass shards.

- And where am I, was I really lying in the casket? - Lenin cunningly unbuttons his jacket, grabs it at the lapels and loudly laughs. - That's right, enough lying around in the casket, this way one can entirely snore over the world revolution!

A terrible stone blow hits the wall of the Mausoleum. It cracks and fragments of the facing slabs drop out of the fissure to the room floor. The monster’s massive grinning face is visible through the black dust, it crudely resembles the face of the man who stands in front of Sonya. The golem bends forward, twists his fingers and, following his infernal volcanic roar, a fiery heat erupts out of his maw.

- And what is this? - contagiously laughs Lenin. - This marble titan in a cap is me or what? Hahaha! - all of a sudden his face gets serious. - This will not do. Remove it. - Lenin decisively waves his hand and a horrifying firestorm descends upon the Kremlin, covers the golem’s body and eats it away, sucking black dusty whirlwinds out of the monster as if he would be made out of simple coal. The bent giant unevenly loses his form, a melting piece falls out of his chest and opens a fiery abyss behind it.
- We’ll all burn. This, my friends, is inevitable, - cheerfully remarks Lenin while looking at the burning skyscraper of the giant and puts his hand on Sonya’s shoulder. - And you, boys and girls, will build houses out of these ruins, piled up by the forces of nature. There you go.